This Courageous Woman: A Socio-rhetorical Womanist
Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31

By

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A thesis project submitted in accordance with the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

At
Murdoch University

Supervisor: Dr Suzanne Boorer

August 2012
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any university or tertiary institution.

____________________________________________
Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe
Abstract

The title of Proverbs 31:10-31, namely, הָרְשָׁפָה ‘a woman of courage’, cultivated my interest in this text and hence this thesis. Through the use of a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach under the banner, Socio-rhetorical Womanist reading, I endeavour to show that the picture here portrayed in Proverbs 31:10-31 is a complex one. Previously scholars have tackled the poem from different perspectives and contexts. However they have understated or misread the rather richly nuanced portrayal that is here depicted in the portrait of the woman. The over simplified reading of the text has resulted in such translations of הָרְשָׁפָה as ‘a good wife, an excellent wife, a virtuous wife or even a woman of substance or valour but, not as ‘a woman of courage’ which I maintain is a more fitting translation of the Hebrew phrase הָרְשָׁפָה. By exploring the different textures of inner, inter, socio-cultural and ideological textures of Proverbs 31:10-31 as permitted by the socio-rhetorical approach, the thesis shows that the woman here described is more than a wife and mother, roles which are stereotypically used for the subordination of women. With the influence of my interpersonal and ideological womanist reading, our subject is shown to be a woman of courage, who displays autonomy, physical prowess, is a trader and business guru who acquires land. She is also a wise and thoughtful woman. The woman is on the same footing as men of courage described throughout the Hebrew bible. The poem is read as a polemic to the patriarchal status quo with its tendency to subordinate, suppress and oppress women on the basis of their gender. It ends on a strong note, demanding that the woman be duly recognized for her deeds of courage particularly at the public level of the ‘gates’. Consequently this thesis contends that the poem constitutes a paradigm shift in relation to gender based inequality, challenging men to reconsider their stance and empowering women to take their place as equal partners.
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Acknowledgements

I am profoundly indebted to a number of people who in different ways have contributed to the progress of this thesis. My greatest gratitude goes to Dr Suzanne Boorer my mentor, teacher and confidante for her ability to listen and advise and whenever necessary give a gentle push. Her cogent, meticulous and insightful scrutiny greatly sharpened my ideas as well as my writing skills. On a more personal note, I am eternally grateful to her for inspiring and motivating me to persevere during a very stressful period of my life. Her unshakeable belief in me made this possible.

I would also like to thank Dr Elizabeth Boase who saw me through the initial stages of this thesis at the university of Notre Dame. I am grateful too to Prof. Hendrik Bosman of the University of Stellenbosch, who first introduced me to Proverbs 31:10-31.

My special thanks to Paul McNeela, my love and best friend. I thank him for his encouragement and support and for his confidence in me. Paul’s painstaking proofreading of this thesis, with such careful attention to detail has impacted greatly on its present shape.

Special thanks too to my mum and dad for their emotional support and prayers. To my sister Lesedi Kebaneilwe who shared the burden of looking after my kids when times were really hard for me, I am forever thankful. I am also indebted to my three children, Mighty, Sharon and Kgosi whose love and presence in my life is a constant source of sanity.

I wish to also thank my friends, Julie Nyatsambo, Eunice Jones and Lynda Bain for their support. My appreciation too goes to Janina, Claire and Morthy, my fellow PhD candidates at Murdoch University for the long coffees during which we shared a lot of our experiences. They were a great source of inspiration.

Last but not least, I am very grateful to the University of Botswana for giving me the opportunity to take time off to pursue the PhD. A note of thanks too to the University of Murdoch, for all the support I received throughout my studies at the institution. Above all, God has been faithful and I thank Him.
Abbreviations

ANE  Ancient Near East
HB  Hebrew Bible
HTR  Harvard Theological Review
BCTA  Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Africa
BS  Bibotheca Sacra
BT  Black Theology
CJ  Conservative Judaism
CTS  Chafer Theological Seminary Journal
ER  The Ecumenical Review
FT  Feminist Theology
Hist  Historicism
Int  Interpretation
JHS  The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures
JANES  Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society
JBLS  Journal of Biblical Literature
JFSR  Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JITC  Journal of the International Theological Centre
JNES  Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JBQ  The Jewish Biblical Quarterly
JQR  Jewish Quarterly Review
JSJ  Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSOT  Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
KJV  King James Version
LXX  Septuagint
MT  Masoretic Text
NAB  New American Bible
NEB  New English Bible
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NJB</td>
<td>New Jerusalem Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NKJV</td>
<td>New King James Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>RV</td>
<td>Revue Biblique</td>
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<tr>
<td>REV</td>
<td>Revised English Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBL</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB</td>
<td>The Tyndale Bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td>Vestus Testamentum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZAW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The subject of Proverbs 31:10-31 namely, לָיְלָה הָיִלָה, has received significant theological and academic attention to date. A point which has often attracted the attention of many interpreters and commentators is the portrait of a female figure in such manly terms that to some extent does not correspond to the nature of biblical materials in general. While previous studies show that the Bible as a whole is androcentric, or male-centred in its subject matter, its authorship and its perspectives, Prov. 31:10-31 presents its female subject לָיְלָה differently. She is portrayed as a heroine, a woman who is powerful in her own right, and

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1 The term ‘manly/masculine’ is used by the present researcher to underline the point that such descriptions were almost exclusively male and that it was uncommon for a woman to be described as לָיְלָה. Dorothee Metlitzki (‘A Woman of Virtue: A Note on Eshet Hayil,’ in Orim Vol. 1/2 [1986], pp. 23-26) asserts that the term לָיְלָה which is usually translated as ‘virtue’ derives from the Latin word virtus meaning ‘manly excellence’ from vir for ‘man’. She further notes that there are only two other instances of לָיְלָה in the entire Hebrew bible namely, Prov. 12: 4 and Ruth 3:11. Carole R. Fontaine (‘Proverbs,’ in Women’s Bible Commentary eds. Carol A. Newsom et.al. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999], pp. 153-160) notes that the term לָיְלָה ‘worth’ as she translates it, is a term more often applied to men, as in the phrase usually translated ‘mighty men’ and it denotes persons at the height of their powers and capabilities. Christine R. Yoder (‘The Woman of Substance [לָיְלָה]: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-3,’ in Journal of Biblical Literature (JBL) 122/3[2003], pp. 427-445) convincingly observes that although there are many men of לָיְלָה in the Hebrew bible, there are only two references to women of לָיְלָה outside of Prov. 31:10-3 and these are; Prov. 12:4 and Ruth 3:11.

2 Carol L. Meyers, ‘Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible’ in Women’s Bible Commentary eds. Carol A. Newsom et.al. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998] pp. 251-259. Meyers further argues that because of its androcentric nature, the bible focuses far more on men than on women. Likewise Phyllis A. Bird (Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], p. 53) contends that the Old Testament/ Hebrew bible is the product of a patriarchal world, the work of male authors and male editors. Women in the biblical text are presented through male eyes, for the purposes determined by male authors. Phyllis A. Bird (‘The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus’, in Women in the Hebrew Bible ed. Alice Bach [New York: Routledge, 1999], pp. 6-33) further maintains that in the traditional Israelite culture, described in the Bible, women were subjected to the rule of men. In that culture women belonged in the home while the public sphere was male-oriented, male-controlled, male dominated, and it governed the domestic realm.


industrious and adventurous entrepreneur, and a resourceful and selfless woman who is also self-sufficient.

However, the unusual portrayal of the woman in the terms listed here is not the only reason for the attention this text has provoked. The nature of the text (Prov. 31:10-31) has also led scholars to ask certain questions including, as noted by Hawkins:

Does the description refer to a wife and mother who might have lived, or is it describing qualities desired of all women for them to aspire to attain, or is ‘the noble wife’ a personification of wisdom, or is she the epitome of wisdom?

Different scholars, as shall be outlined later in this chapter, have tackled some or all of these questions. Nonetheless the interpretation of the woman at the centre of this acrostic poem is even more complicated than this. It is complex in part because of the fact that different scholars, interpreters and commentators who approach the poem, do so not only from different perspectives but also from diverse contexts.

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The plethora of perspectives and contexts has shaped both the kind of questions and answers each scholar has brought to the text. Thus, as asserted by some scholars, all interpretations bear the bias of the interpreters. The situation in turn has contributed to the continuing controversy and debate regarding the definitions and interpretations of our text. This is the debate that the present research enters.

The said complexity in understanding the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 is witnessed by the variations one encounters in the title given to Prov. 31:10-31 in the English versions of the Bible. For instance; the New International Version (NIV) translates נָשִׂיאתָה as ‘the wife of noble character’; The Revised Standard Version (RSV) refers to her as ‘the good wife’; New King James Version (NKJV) names her ‘the virtuous woman’. In the New English Bible (NEB) she is defined as the ‘good or capable wife’. These translations seem to restrict the נָשִׂיאתָה to the household domain, portraying her as a good ‘wife,’ conforming to the traditional patriarchal expectations which limit her to the internal roles of mother and wife.

However, in this thesis I want to offer an alternative hermeneutic to Prov. 31:10-31 that seeks to read the text in relation to issues of the liberation and empowerment especially of African,

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10 I mark the word ‘wife’ in these translations because it indicates the inherent bias that inclines heavily towards the wifeliness and domesticity of this female figure.

11 Bird (Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities, p. 57) argues that the life and work of the Israelite woman centered in the home and duties to family.
Batwana women. In general, contemporary African women continue to struggle to affirm themselves within oppressive patriarchal structures. There is hope that, given its positive portrayal of the woman of courage, Prov. 31:10-31 may resonate with the lives of these women if explored from other angles. I want to investigate whether or not the text can perhaps be seen to embody a paradigm shift regarding female and male relationships. Consequently, my major aim is to explore in detail, the portrayal of the woman who is the subject of this acrostic poem, her deeds, character and qualities and what implications if any, the text could have for contemporary lives of both women and men.\footnote{The hermeneutic will be outlined in detail later in this chapter.}

Of major interest in the following discussion, is to discover how previous studies have wrestled with uncovering and understanding the passage of Prov. 31:10-31. The survey will focus on three aspects of our text and these are;

1. How previous studies have dealt with the portrayal of the woman at the centre of Prov. 31:10-31. That is, who do they say she is? This will lead to the question of whether the existing literature reveals any discernible trends in the way scholars have unpacked the portrayal of our subject. Do the scholars understand the portrayal as emerging completely or in part from real life experiences of women in ancient Israelite life? Do they suggest that she is a real woman or that she is a personification of wisdom or what?
2. What do they say about her deeds, character and qualities? Does the literature suggest that the picture reveals the roles, character and qualities of ancient Israelite, especially Persian period women?

3. What implications (if any) for contemporary gender issues do they ascribe to having a woman of her identity, character and deeds? That is, I will demonstrate that the portrayal of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 may not only resonate with but also be informative to African, especially Batswana women in their struggles to affirm themselves within their oppressive patriarchal contexts.

1.1. History of Interpretation

The woman of Prov. 31:10-31 has enjoyed a considerable amount of scholarly interrogations to the present, rendering it impossible to provide a comprehensive study of all who have taken part in the ongoing debate. However this particular review intends to cover as much of the existing literature as deemed reasonable to provide a general overview of our subject, namely, the נ押金ו of Prov. 31:10-31. This will include selected commentaries and articles that have been influential, dating from the nineteenth century to the present.

Writing as early as 1846, Charles Bridges in his Commentary on the book of Proverbs defines the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 as ‘a virtuous wife’. According to him, this is an elegant poem of twenty-two verses that describes a wife, a mistress and a mother. It is the portrait of the character of a wife; her fidelity, oneness of heart, affection, dutifulness that makes her

14 Bridges, A Commentary, p. 620.
husband safely trust her. The husband of the virtuous wife is at ease having left his interests in the care of his wife and hence a faithful wife and a confiding husband mutually bless each other. Bridges further maintains that the husband rules in the sphere ‘without’ and encourages his wife to rule in her sphere ‘within’.

Bridges further maintains that the husband rules in the sphere ‘without’ and encourages his wife to rule in her sphere ‘within’.

Crawford H. Toy in his 1899 commentary defines the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 as ‘the ideal wife’. He describes this section of Proverbs as the ‘Golden ABC’ of the perfect wife which he maintains is notable for what it includes and what it omits. He summarizes his comments on this poem by asserting that the ideal wife here described is the industrious, sagacious business manager of the house, and a kind-hearted mistress. She is also a trusted friend of her husband and children who honour her for what she does. He insists that the husband of this woman does not take part in domestic administration but is busy with the public affairs of the community (v. 23). The wife conducts everything with such prudence and economy that her husband has ‘no need of spoil’ (v. 12) and her highest happiness is to live for him and do him good and not evil all her life.

Margaret B. Crook in her article entitled ‘The Marriageable Maiden of Prov. 31:10-31’ (1954), continues the same slant by defining the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 (ךָֽלָּ֝שְׁנָּ֣֝הָאָּף) as ‘the

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15 Bridges, A Commentary, p. 621.
16 Bridges, A Commentary, p. 621.
17 Bridges, A Commentary, p. 621.
19 Toy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, p. 542.
20 Toy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, p. 542.
21 Toy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, p. 542.
22 Toy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, p 542.
23 Toy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, p. 542.
Good Wife.’  

Crook holds that it is more realistic to describe this ‘good wife’ as the ‘marriageable maiden.’ She is an ideal and there was never any such person. Crook maintains:

What we have here is an instruction for a marriageable maiden on a par with that given to young men as part of their preparation, that is, before they become heads of families, judges, ambassadors and viziers.

Crook further maintains that the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 is a woman of competence, of tireless industry in the supply and administration of her household. Remarkably, she argues that the translators may have gone further than the Hebrew warrants suggesting that the woman might have been able to ‘buy a field’ (v. 16). Crook believes that the land must have belonged to the woman’s husband, on a par with the field of Boaz or with that which Naomi offered for sale (Ruth 2:3; 4:3). As a mistress of the house, her role was to supervise the spinning, to sort out the wool and flax after it is spun and to work it out according to her needs.

31 Crook, ‘The Marriageable Maiden,’ p. 139.
The primary teaching of the poem on the ‘marriageable maiden’ is that the bride-to-be must apply herself to household management, to horticulture, to the arts of weaving and design, to the production of garments; all pursuits not possibly learnt in a day. Furthermore, the girl will become the much sought-after bride of some leading citizen, who will be noticed for the attire on his back (v. 23); she will be honoured as a woman of intelligence (v. 30) and her tireless efforts to serve her household’s sartorial and financial interests will see her receive their praise (v. 28).

Derek Kidner in his commentary on Proverbs provides a brief discussion of Prov. 31:10-31 which he entitles ‘An Alphabet of Wifely Excellence’. According to Kidner, this woman’s standard isn’t within the reach of all for it presupposes unusual gifts and material resources. It is the fullest flowering of domesticity, which is revealed as no petty and restricted sphere, and its mistress as no cipher. Kidner contends that what we have here (Prov. 31:10-31) is a portrait of formidable powers and great achievements; achievements partly in the housewife’s own nurture and produce (v. 31), and partly in her unseen contribution to her husband’s good reputation (v. 23).

Following in his predecessors’ footsteps (Bridges, Toy, Crook and Kidner), William McKane defines the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 as ‘a wife of many parts’. McKane puts emphasis on

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33 Crook, ‘The Marriageable Maiden,’ p. 140.
the wifeliness of the woman described in this text. McKane contends that because of its acrostic form, the poem has a haphazard structure in which the poet jumps from one point to another without taking note of what has gone before or was to come after. However McKane maintains that the poet succeeds in constructing an identifiable and credible picture of a particular kind of woman and that the poem gives a cumulative impression.

McKane sees the rhetorical question ‘who can find’ (v. 10) as suggestive of the woman’s scarcity and higher worth, which in turn points to the difficulty in finding such a one. She is one whose husband has confidence in at all times (v. 11). He further holds that the husband of this woman is a farmer and she is a secondary producer and trader and hence can be likened to merchant ships (v. 14). He however asserts that such a woman contributes tremendously to her husband’s success in public life for he has no domestic cares.

McKane adds that because this man’s house is prosperous and honourable he can afford a good reputation.

Roger Whybray likewise defines the subject of Prov. 31:10-31 as ‘a capable wife’. He argues further that the theme of the poem is the ‘ideal wife’ who is described from a practical, unromantic point of view. Like the rest of those before him, Whybray puts emphasis on the

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39 McKane, Proverbs, p. 665.
40 McKane, Proverbs, p. 665. McKane makes reference to Crook (‘The Marriageable Maiden,’ p. 139) who has also alluded to a similar comment about the haphazardness of the poem.
41 McKane, Proverbs, p. 665.
42 McKane, Proverbs, p. 667.
43 McKane, Proverbs, p. 666.
44 McKane, Proverbs, p. 668.
45 McKane, Proverbs, p. 669.
47 Whybray, The Book of Proverbs, p. 184. Whybray holds that the unromantic perspective of the woman is summed up in v. 30 in which it is shown clearly that beauty is the last thing that a man should look for in a wife.
benefits the woman brings to her husband.\textsuperscript{48} He further contends that behind the portrayal of the good wife lies the importance of family in ancient Israel.\textsuperscript{49} This was a culture in which a good wife was an important necessity for its achievement.\textsuperscript{50} 

Thomas McCreesh in his influential 1985 article, defines the phrase הָרַנְשֵׁת (Prov. 31:10) as the ‘good or worthy wife.’\textsuperscript{51} He maintains that the picture of the wife drawn in this text inclines heavily toward the symbolic, (a point that has continued to be supported by many scholars),\textsuperscript{52} distanced as it were, from the lives of actual women. According to McCreesh, remarkable similarities between this portrayal and the descriptions of Wisdom (Prov. 1-9) indicate that the poem in chapter 31 is the book’s final masterful portrait of Wisdom.\textsuperscript{53} She was presented in chapter 9 as a young marriageable woman and now she is a faithful wife and skilled mistress of her household.\textsuperscript{54}

McCreesh further argues that in Prov. 31:10-31 major themes and ideas of the book of Proverbs are summarized in a statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful and selfless wife.\textsuperscript{55} Interestingly he notes that the very emphasis of the poem on

\textsuperscript{48} Whybray, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{49} Whybray, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{50} Whybray, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{54} McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 46.
the woman’s many tasks presents an ‘unusual’ feature in that the husband is left with little or nothing to do. McCreesh explains away this unusual portrayal of a woman, by contending that the poem is intentionally one sided because it is meant to describe not just any wife, not even the ideal wife but a special, unique wife. It is the description of a wife at the heart and source of everything within her domain; nothing is beneath nor beyond her; nothing is foreign to her and this is because she is primarily a symbol.

Claudia Camp offers a similar outlook to McCreesh by identifying the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 as an example of wisdom personified. Like McCreesh she draws her conclusions from the similarities between the two female figures. Camp however goes further to suggest that the woman is also an ideal portrait of a wise wife therefore offering an ambiguous identity. She maintains that the woman is not simply the maintainer of a household but the source of its identity as well. This is an identity that glorifies the house because from the house society as a whole finds its roots. That is, the association of the woman’s husband

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56 I have marked McCreesh’s use of the term ‘unusual’ in the context in which he uses it here because I think it is an important indicator of his androcentric, male stereotypical reading and interpretation of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31.
57 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 27.
58 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 28.
59 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 28. Roger N. Whybray in his late commentary (The New Century Bible Commentary: Proverbs [Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994], p. 425) also summarises McCreesh’s conclusion thus ‘Mccreesh (‘Wisdom as Wife’, pp. 25-46), also saw the poem as a description of omnicompetent Wisdom and also pointed out a further significant characteristic: that in contrast to the treatment of the theme in the non-Israelite instructions, it is here the woman who completely dominates the scene, while the husband, although he sits with elders of the land (v. 23), is a very minor character, whose only other function is to praise her (v. 28), so giving her what is due to Wisdom from an ordinary mortal. The symbolic identification of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 as ‘Woman Wisdom’ has been carried on decades later by other scholars such as Naphtali Gutstein, (’Proverbs 31:10-31: The Woman of Valour’, p. 38), who sees the woman as a wife and mother; who is also some kind of a superwoman with qualities almost impossible for any person to achieve and hence symbolic of something else, which he however does not explain.
61 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, pp. 90-93.
62 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 93.
63 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 93.
64 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 92.
with her wise government of the house (v. 23), plus the fact that her vibrations and creations echo in the gates (v. 31), is an indication that the woman identifies not only with the house, but the public domain as well. Consequently, life in the public arena finds its bearing in the home and family life since it is from the woman and her house that the one who judges the society (the husband) derives. Camp also concludes, like her contemporary McCreesh, that while in Prov. 1-9 Woman Wisdom was introduced as crying out on the streets, enticing her lovers to come to her home, in 31:10-31 she (wisdom) has settled down and is preparing a meal in her house.

Kenneth Aitken, like McCreesh, translates בְּנֵיהֶם to mean ‘the good wife’ whom he asserts is not only a very busy house wife, but also a shrewd and enterprising business woman. Unlike the scholars reviewed above, Aitken touches on the implications of the portrait of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31. Without giving any reason, he insists that while there is what he calls ‘ordinary’ points in the portrait, which could apply to any housewife, the portrait cannot however be used as a blueprint for the ideal Israelite housewife. Aitken further observes that the portrait has even far less relevance for a housewife in the Western society, given its lack of reference to the relationship between the wife and her husband. It is also striking that the woman is viewed entirely as enhancing her husband’s honour and managing domestic affairs. However Aitken does not pursue the implications further.

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67 Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, p. 252. See also a similar comment by McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 28.
Different from interpretations that preceded him, Albert Wolters pays attentions to the form or genre of what he calls ‘the song of the valiant woman.’\textsuperscript{72} From a form-critical analysis of the poem, he raises some important insights that are worthy of attention. He argues convincingly that רָאָתָה should, in the context of Prov. 31:10-31, be understood as the female counterpart of the זֶה שָׁם ‘mighty man of valour’ (Judges 11:1).\textsuperscript{73} According to Wolters this poem is typical of the category of heroic poetry that describes exploits of men belonging to an aristocratic class.\textsuperscript{74} Likewise the lady described here is the kind of aristocrat of pronounced individuality characteristic of heroic poetry and hence the traits described in the poem suppose that the valiant woman is a heroine in the full sense of the word and is meant to be perceived as such.\textsuperscript{75}

Wolters further contends that despite the many misconceptions to which the term רָאָתָה has been subjected, the impression of a heroine rooted in this portrait keeps cropping up in translations and commentaries.\textsuperscript{76} He maintains that the LXX translates רָאָתָה as γυναικα ἀνδρείαν, a translation which not only means ‘manly woman’ but also ‘woman of courage’.\textsuperscript{77} Wolters purports that the translators of the King James Version were also sensitive to the heroic temper of the poem in their translation of רָאָתָה as a ‘virtuous

\textsuperscript{73} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 453. Furthermore, he maintains that לָּיָל is a word meaning ‘power’ or ‘prowess.’ In v. 29, לָּיָל means ‘to do valiantly’ in a military context and adds that there are other words/phrases in the description that are rich with military connotations as well. Wolters gives an example of a phrases such ‘you surpass them all’ (v. 29) and argues that the Hebrew expression לָּיָל יִלּוֹת ‘to ascend upon’ has a specifically military connotation often used elsewhere in the sense of going out to do battle against an enemy. He is adamant that the meaning ‘surpass’ is only used here.
\textsuperscript{74} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 455. He insists that in this class honour and individual initiative rank high on the scale of values.
\textsuperscript{75} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 455.
\textsuperscript{76} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 455.
\textsuperscript{77} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 455.
woman.' He argues that the translation means as much as ‘heroic woman’ in the English of that time.

Wolters ends on a strong note by asking what significance the ‘heroicizing’ of the woman would have had in Israel. In his answer to the question he insists that the song of the valiant woman (as he constantly refers to Prov. 31:10-31) constitutes a critique of the literature in praise of women which was prevalent at the time in the ancient Near East. The literature was overwhelmingly preoccupied with women’s physical beauty from an erotic/sexual point of view. Against the view, the poem glorifies the woman in the affairs of family, community and business life and concludes by asserting that ‘charm is deceitful…’ (Prov. 31:30). Wolters further argues that the song contains a subtle polemic against the ideal of Hellenism portraying its heroine as the personification of wisdom.

Carole Fontaine in her commentary on Proverbs gives Prov. 31:10-31 the title ‘Acrostic Poem on the ‘Strong Woman’. She recognizes and appreciates the womanhood of the subject of this text. She argues that הָיְתָה, the ‘strong woman’, balances and explicates the imagery of Woman Wisdom in Prov. 1-9. This, she maintains, fittingly sums up the wisdom

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of Proverbs and its ‘cast of stock female characters.’

Concerning the acrostic form of the poem, Fontaine comments that it is a perfect form for a perfect woman.

Fontaine further surmises that the woman is here praised by the sages for symbolic reasons, which she however does not explain. The poem expresses the great value placed on family as a vital social and religious unit in both pre-monarchical and postexilic Israel. While she maintains that the woman here is male identified, Fontaine claims that the portrayal is a polemic and a corrective to the notion of seeing women as dangerous to men.

It is noteworthy that Fontaine sees the opening rhetorical question (v. 10) not as ‘scarcity of finding such a woman’ but as an indication of how unlikely the sages consider the prospect of finding a strong, worthy woman for one’s wife. She remarks notably that v. 30 suggests that women in that community worshipped God through their domestic roles rather than public religious observances. The command that her menfolk ‘give to her of the fruit of her hands’ (v. 31a) might be an indication that she may not automatically have shared in the profits of her own labour, while v. 31b sums up by recalling the imagery of Woman Wisdom: ‘and let

89 Fontaine, ‘Proverbs,’ p. 464.
her works praise her at the gates’ (v. 31b) where Woman Wisdom first gave out her call (Prov. 1:21; 8:3).95

Madipoane Masenya advances a different perspective from which to view the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 and she calls it ‘a reading for the liberation of African and in particular, Northern Sotho women.’96 The hermeneutic is womanist and hence ideological.97 From this particular point of view Masenya holds that there is no doubt that the poet relates the practical qualities of a human woman.98 She however contends that it is about an ideal, one based on certain expectations which society had about women.99 This ideal could be striven for and could be emulated.100

Masenya maintains that, as always in male centred scripture, the positive and the negative roles of women are viewed from a male perspective and this is no exception.101 Citing Camp’s work, Masenya assumes that women in ancient Israelite society were viewed as household managers and hence the household of Prov. 31:10-31 is referred to as the woman’s ‘her house/hold’ (vv. 15, 21, 27).102 Therefore she argues that the use of הָּלַיְהוֹל ‘her lord/master’ for her husband is ironic, except it makes sense in the context of a patriarchal

97 The terms ‘womanist’ and ‘ideology’ will be defined later in this chapter.
100 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 62. Here she claims to differ with Aitken (*Proverbs*, p. 157) who argues that the ideal woman portrayed here cannot be emulated. Her contention is that even though ideal, as she believes, the portrayal of the woman of substance was included in the canon for it to be striven for.
culture. She notes remarkably that while it is good for a wife to care for her husband (v. 23), it is the one-sidedness of this portrayal that is problematic since it leads to the subordination of women in most cases, and she affirms that the African family in South Africa is no exception. Masenya demonstrates that, read from a bosadi/womanhood perspective, the poem of Prov. 31:10-31 can be empowering for women, in that, being household managers, they are in control of certain activities from which they make a contribution to the family, but such should not be used to confine women to the household.

She further indicates that a house wife plays administrative roles in the home and she cites as an example how women in Africa had to (and still do) care for their families alone while their men went away as migrant workers in cities. She also refers to the role of nurturing the children as a woman’s role which puts her in a position of power (over her children), and also that in many African homes the woman engages in small business transactions from her house, thus contributing to the household economy.

Masenya comments on the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 caring for the poor and needy (v. 20) which she says, in her context, would be reminiscent of a wealthy white woman reaching out to the indigenous poor. On another note, the same could echo the African spirit of socialism/humanism ‘ubuntu’ as opposed to individualism. Masenya contends strongly that

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105 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 64.
106 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 64.
107 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 64.
108 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 64.
109 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 64.
African people are culturally caring and compassionate. Further reference is made to this woman’s hard work and tireless industry. Masenya is resolute that hard work should not be reserved for women, as implied in the poem, but that work should be shared and with fair remuneration. She concludes on a strong note that ‘marriage should not serve as an institution in which the status of one is defined in terms of the other, and that marriage should not be idolized’.

Christine R. Yoder too, like Masenya, reads from a specific perspective; in this case, ‘a socioeconomic reading.’ She argues, that the question ‘who can find’? (v. 10a) is suggestive of the rarity of such a woman. Much more than the rarity of such a woman, Yoder explains further that there is an indication of the high value of the woman and maintains that, in so far as the woman is ascribed a price, she is a typical Persian-period bride. Accordingly, marriage to a valuable bride afforded a man greater financial resources, which is why ‘he does not lack for loot’ (v. 11).

Moreover the ‘woman of substance’ adds more to the financial security of the family through her business endeavours, her industry of spinning and weaving. Yoder insists that

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112 Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 65. By not idolizing marriage Masenya suggests, albeit indirectly, that families may not replicate the one portrayed in Prov. 31:10-31 which is made of wife, husband, children and servants. That is, there is nothing like a universal ideal family but, rather different types of families may exist including for those who choose celibacy and these should not be judged.
114 Yoder, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ p. 432.
117 This is Yoder’s translation of הָרְשִׁיָּה. 
women in the Persian period were workers in the royal economy, working at different ranks and degrees of specialization, with some capitalizing on financial opportunities. While the woman might have brought food from far places or that the food she brought might have been imported by someone else from afar (v. 14b), Yoder explains this as typical of Persian-period Israelite society. She further argues that women of high rank in Persian-period Israel were property holders and estate owners.

Thus it is evident that according to Yoder’s socioeconomic reading of Prov. 31:10-31, the portrait of the woman of substance is here reminiscent of real women’s experiences in Persian-period Israel (at least those in the upper class). She is a bride highly valued for her wealth and socioeconomic potential which was all for the benefit of particularly her husband and this was the practise during the time. However, Yoder is adamant that although based on real women, Prov. 31:10-31, is a portrait of an ideal wife intended predominantly for a male audience. Accordingly, the woman remains a composite figure who embodies no one woman, but is an example of the desired attributes of many women. Thus she is an imagination of all attributes that could possibly make a woman of such acumen as described here, derived from experiences of real women’s lives and activities.

120 Yoder, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ pp. 440-441. She argues that archaeological evidence shows that during this time the whole of Palestine experienced unprecedented growth in international commerce.
121 Yoder, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ p. 444.
Ezra Chitando in his Zimbabwean contextual reading of Prov. 31:10-31, defines בוטנת as ‘the good wife.’ In his quest to re-read this text for and within the context of the HIV and AIDS, Chitando maintains that the poem outlines the qualities of a ‘good wife.’ It is a poem that has gained popularity in the Zimbabwean context probably because it shares common ideals with it. It appears to praise the positive qualities found in married women. A good wife is industrious and financially astute and is celebrated both in the culture of the text and the Zimbabwean one.

However Chitando ascertains that the poem entrenches patriarchal principles and hence traditionalists have affirmed it for such reasons. It projects the image of an efficient and self-sacrificing woman who brings dignity to her husband. Furthermore, Chitando maintains that while the ideal to have married women sacrifice themselves for their families (vv. 12, 29) is an appealing one, the realities of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe demands a re-reading of this poem. He notes adamantly that in Zimbabwe married women are exposed by their unfaithful husbands to the risk of HIV infection and affirms that being a good wife in such dire conditions is a challenge. While wives are called to ‘do no harm to their husbands’ (v. 12), husbands have not reciprocated. Chitando contends rightly that the reality of HIV and AIDS demands that wives must protect themselves from infection.

However their powerlessness in negotiating safer sex in the marriage context in Zimbabwe has meant that husbands have brought them harm in most instances.\textsuperscript{137}

Chitando insists that in both contexts (the ancient Israelite and the Zimbabwean contexts) the wife is extolled for her prudence.\textsuperscript{138} However because of the prevailing economic crisis in Zimbabwe, women’s ability to provide for their families has been seriously curtailed.\textsuperscript{139} The economic crisis has instead led Zimbabwean women into temporary economic exile which has led to an increase in their vulnerability.\textsuperscript{140} Therefore being ‘the good wife’ in the Zimbabwean HIV and AIDS context entails actively seeking knowledge about the pandemic and being proactive about one’s vulnerability to the infection.\textsuperscript{141}

Therefore Chitando concludes that ‘the good wife’ is the one who challenges corrupt and oppressive measures in high places and demands accountability, championing the rights of the down trodden and the outcasts.\textsuperscript{142} While traditional readings of the poem of Prov. 31:10-31 continue to promote docility and domesticity, women and women’s movements should adopt liberating ways and shake off the inherited traditions in order to empower women against HIV and AIDS.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{139} Chitando, ‘The Good Wife,’ p. 155.
\textsuperscript{140} Chitando, ‘The Good Wife,’ p. 154. Chitando notes remarkably that while these women travel outside of their country to seek provision for their families they have become exposed to such ills as rape. Moreover their mobility away from their husbands means that some husbands pursue other sexual partners in the absence of their wives which further increases the risk to these women. He affirms that labels such as ‘prostitute’, ‘loose and dangerous woman’ accompany these courageous women.
\textsuperscript{141} Chitando, ‘The Good Wife,’ p. 156.
\textsuperscript{142} Chitando, ‘The Good Wife,’ p. 156.
Michael V. Fox in his recent commentary on Proverbs, translates לְאֵלֶּה as ‘the Woman of Strength’. He observes interestingly that throughout the book of Proverbs men’s concerns are being addressed and almost exclusively men are described as wise. He argues that in Prov. 31:10-31 the book concludes by describing a wise woman but that this too is a concern for men. Fox concludes that the poem praises the woman’s capabilities in bringing income into the home, caring for her household, being charitable to the poor, speaking wisdom and kindness as well as living in the fear of God. He notes that contrary to a common stereotype of ancient Israelite women, the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 has considerable independence in interacting with outsiders and conducting business to the extent that she is even able to purchase real estate.

The woman of strength’s home is a base for her participation in communal life. Her husband’s prestige as he sits among the elders at the city gates derives from her. Fox purports that the rhetorical question in v. 10 is an exclamation of awe at the cherished woman’s worth and does not suggest the non-existence of such a woman. Furthermore, the rhetorical question is not suggesting that such a woman is statistically rare (for such would only discourage young men from seeking one), but that she is precious. Significantly Fox insists that the woman’s strength is in her character and that even her practical competencies are not just technical skills but manifestations of her focus.

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selflessness and determination. She is a woman of good judgement and this is what the poem is trying to inculcate in its male readers.

In reviewing the history of research into Prov. 31:10-31, a number of trends emerge. Initially commentators dealing with Prov. 31:10-31 tended to define and identify the subject of this poem, namely, וָאֵֽשֶׁת, in terms of her attachment to her husband as a virtuous, good, capable, ideal and excellent ‘wife’. The scholars include Bridges, Crook and Kidner, just to mention a few. What these scholars have in common in their translations and interpretations is the emphasis they put on the woman’s ‘wifely’ character, duties and prudent domesticity as a sphere separate from the ‘public affairs of a man’s world’. She is identified with the house as her rightful place of operation as a wife and a mother. These readings overlook any indications within the poem of the woman’s involvement in the public sphere away from her house.

Another noticeable trend is the identification of וָאֵֽשֶׁת with Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9 in which the Woman of Courage is viewed as personified wisdom. Among those who hold the view are McCreesh and Camp. According to this strand the Woman of Courage may not be taken as a representation of a human woman but she must remain in the symbolic world like that of Prov. 1-9 where God’s wisdom is personified as a woman. These readings do not

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153 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 891.
154 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 892.
157 See pp. 9 and 11 above.
envision the possibility of any real person being able to attain what the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 has attained. Common to this trend also is that they rigidly construe the rhetorical question of Prov. 31:10a as implicating impossibility. Accordingly, the woman is an idealized, composite figure in whom everything the sages imagined about what would make an ideal Israelite wife is contained. She is a literary icon in the mind of the sages. The readings in this category insist that there was never any such a person nor can ever be a person so invested with qualities, capabilities and achievements as described in the woman of Prov. 31:10-31. Consequently what we have in the text is the sages’ creative and perhaps even wild imagination of a perfect wife.

Yet another strand proposes that the portrait of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 must necessarily be derived, at least in part, from the experiences of real women in the Persian period Israel. These include primarily scholars such as Yoder, Masenya and by implication, Fox. 158

Observable from the review too is that more recently scholars have tended towards interpretations and readings that pay attention to the context of the reader. Scholars within this category include Masenya and Chitando. 159 These scholars approach the text from particular perspectives that are both reader oriented and ideological. They are seeking to find the relevance of the text to real life situations. Emphasis is placed on finding the meaning of especially when read from specific ideological stand points and to address certain

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158 Yoder insists that the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 is typical of Persian period Israelite woman. See pp. 18-20 above. Masenya too asserts that the portrait of Prov. 31:10-31 relates practical qualities of a human woman. See pp. 16-18 of this chapter. Likewise Fox comments that the rhetorical question of Prov. 31:10a does not imply the non-existence of such a woman. Therefore Fox’s comment suggests, albeit by implication, that the woman here must be real. See pp. 21-22 above.

159 Refer to pp. 18-21 above.
life situations. For example, Masenya reads from a womanist/womanhood perspective that is aimed at the liberation of not just South African women but, specifically Northern Sotho women. She insists that even though idealized, the portrait of Prov. 31:10-31 relates the qualities of a human woman which can be striven for and be emulated. Chitando reads from and for the Zimbabwean HIV and AIDS context. His conclusion is that in the face of HIV and AIDS, ‘the good wife’ (Prov. 31:10-31) should be the one who strives to protect herself against this pandemic.

One scholar, namely, Wolters, reads from a form-critical analysis in which he seeks to explore the genre of the text. He maintains that Prov. 31:10-31 is a song to the valiant woman. Yoder, on the other hand reads from a socio-economic perspective which is also feminist. Her interpretation of Prov. 31:10-31 seeks to affirm the socio-economic status of women in the Persian period Israel. She concludes that the woman of Prov. 31:10-31, is a composite figure who even though idealized, echoes the life of women in the Israelite community of the time especially, wealthy Royal class women.

Over and above the aforementioned interpretations of Prov. 31:10-31, I want to suggest an alternative hermeneutic, namely, a womanist socio-rhetorical reading. My hermeneutic builds on especially the reader and ideological oriented readings that we have discussed above. It is ideological in that it is womanist. I am interested in finding the implications of the portrait of the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 with regard to the status of oppressed women, especially African women. The studies of Prov. 31:10-31 by especially Yoder, Camp, Aitken, Fontaine, Masenya, Chitando and Fox will prove invaluable to my investigation.
For instance, while Yoder reads Prov. 31:10-31 from a socioeconomic perspective, I will read from a socio-rhetorical standpoint.\textsuperscript{160} Furthermore, like Camp, Fontaine and Masenya who respectively read from a feminist and a womanist perspective, my reading is womanist.\textsuperscript{161} Consequently my analysis of Prov. 31:10-31 goes further than the previous studies on the text (at least given the reviewed literature in this chapter), by engaging the use of a complex method that combines the socio-rhetorical and womanist perspectives (as shall be expounded on soon).

Furthermore, the implications of having a woman portrayed in the terms in which the woman at the centre of our text is depicted, as a woman of courage’, are of major interest to my study. This builds on the studies of such scholars as Aitken, Wolters and Fontaine who merely touch on this aspect but do not explore it further. For example, Aitken mentions that the portrait could apply to any housewife but can neither be used as a blueprint for the Israelite housewife nor for a housewife in the contemporary world because of its obscurity regarding the spousal relationship. However, Aitken does not go further to explore the implications of the portrait.\textsuperscript{162} Likewise Wolters only touches on the issue of what implications could possibly accompany what he calls the ‘heroicizing’ of a woman. His attempt at dealing with or exploring this otherwise important aspect of the text (according to me) is very limited and hence I wish to take it further in my analysis.\textsuperscript{163} Fontaine equally limits herself to mentioning just one possible implication of the portrait of Prov. 31:10-31. She holds that it is a polemic and a corrective to the view that sees women as dangerous to

\textsuperscript{160} I will define and discuss the socio-rhetorical method shortly in what follows.
\textsuperscript{161} I will explicate this later in this chapter when I discuss my methodology of the study.
\textsuperscript{162} See p. 12 above.
\textsuperscript{163} See pp. 13-14 above.
men and she does not go beyond just a single statement.

I seek to explore and evaluate the impact that the portrayal of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 would have in the contemporary world. My quest is propelled by an observation of the continuing struggles for women to affirm themselves within and against gender oppressive structures. I hope to further find out whether or not the portrayal might help the ‘male-gendered others’ (males/men) towards a harmonic relationship with their ‘female-gendered counterparts’ (female/women). I will now move on to explain my methodology.

1.2. Method: A Socio-rhetorical Womanist Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31?

In order to explore the issues raised above, I will employ myriad tools of investigation, integrated for the purpose of interpreting Prov. 31:10-31. The said tools are combined under the banner Socio-rhetorical womanist reading. It is worth mentioning here that, while the chosen tools of analysis are diverse, they have been synchronised for the purpose of this particular study. This will hopefully provide a multidimensional approach to the text which will appreciate its richness. The rationale for my choice of tools/approaches is twofold; a) the socio-rhetorical method is particularly appealing as a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach to texts and b) the womanist theory is chosen for its core interest in contextual reading of texts that focuses especially on the experiences of African and other women of colour. In a way, the womanist approach is particularly suitable to me as an African (Motswana) woman seeking to read the text for my context. Therefore this study aims to carry out a socio-rhetorical analysis that is flavoured with, and couched within a womanist
ideological framework of reference. The array of approaches will be expounded on in the following discussion.

1.2.1. Womanist Approach?

Prior to defining the womanist theory or method, it is necessary to sketch a broader framework so as to allow the reader the opportunity to understand, and perhaps even appreciate its nuances. It is equally important to offer a theoretical discussion of the major concerns and aims of this method and how it is going to be useful in my study of Prov. 31:10-31.

The term Womanist derives from Womanism which was adapted from Alice Walker’s book entitled *In search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. To use Walker’s expression, ‘womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’. Similarly, Linda Hogan maintains that the term represents a ‘feminist of colour’. Therefore womanism/womanist theory developed partly from critiques of feminist criticism. As maintained by Deidre Hill Butler, ‘the need for the term arose from the early feminist movement, which was led by middle-class White women advocating social changes, such as woman’s suffrage.’ The Feminist movement however, focused primarily on gender-based oppression, but ignored oppression

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164 The two terms, ‘theory’ or ‘method’ shall henceforth be used interchangeably.
166 Hogan, *From Women’s Experience*, p.122.
based on racism and classism. To counter this trend, womanists pointed out that Black/African women experience a different kind of oppression. Therefore in order to understand womanism/womanist theory we first need to understand feminism/feminist theory as it forms the broader framework and background for our method. Accordingly, we shall in what follows explore, albeit briefly, the feminist theory as a starting point toward an informed understanding of the womanist method.

Feminism/feminist theory is broad but, for our limited purpose here it is important in so far as it raises a socio-theological critique to all forms of domination apparent in patriarchal societies and institutions. According to Maria P. Aquino, Feminist criticism is a shared perspective which is done by both women and men, and which, because of its liberating religious vision of a ‘balanced’ world, critically reflects on all forms of human struggles for justice. In many cultures, past and present, men have more power than women, socially, politically and economically, with race and class further complicating the hierarchy of dominance. One of the tasks of feminist criticism is to expose the culturally based presuppositions inscribed in our texts. The biblical text, in particular, has prescribed women’s gender, dictated their sexuality and defined their social roles even to the present.

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170 I shall henceforth use the terms Black and African interchangeably.
174 Fewell, ‘Reading the Bible,’ pp. 268-270.
175 Fewell, ‘Reading the Bible,’ p. 268.
176 Fewell, ‘Reading the Bible,’ pp. 268-270. See also Masenya, How Worthy is the Woman of worth?, p. 33.
Feminism has further indicated that the bible itself was written by men who wrote from a cultural context which was overtly patriarchal and hence wrote about women from that angle.\(^\text{177}\) As noted by Fewell, feminist criticism challenges the notion of universals.\(^\text{178}\) It is interested in relevance and hence it resists the categories and definitions, especially those that male writers have set forth in relation to women.\(^\text{179}\) Furthermore, feminists are adamant that all texts are gendered and that gender is not just a matter of sexual difference but, a matter of power.\(^\text{180}\) In reading texts from a feminist perspective therefore, readers read between the lines. The aim is to search for invisible, voiceless women; concentrating on their social, political and economic rights and exploring the relevance of such texts and their messages to contemporary gender struggles.\(^\text{181}\)

In sum, feminist theory involves a critique.\(^\text{182}\) ‘It is a critique of misogyny, the assumption of male supremacy and centrality.’\(^\text{183}\) Feminists pay attention to the significance of sexual perspectives in modes of thought and offer a challenge to masculine bias and female subordination.\(^\text{184}\) 

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\(^\text{179}\) Fewell, ‘Reading the Bible,’ p. 269.

\(^\text{180}\) Fewell, ‘Reading the Bible,’ p. 269.

\(^\text{181}\) Fewell, ‘Reading the Bible,’ p. 268.


\(^\text{183}\) Beasley, *What is Feminism?*, p. 3.

\(^\text{184}\) Beasley, *What is Feminism?*, p. 4.
The feminist theory is however not without limitations. One of its weaknesses is particularly important to this study and this concerns its failure/reluctance to speak of African women (and other women of colour).\textsuperscript{185} As a result, the feminist theory has been complemented by another theory that seeks to extend the parameters of the former to include specifically those issues that affect other women outside of the western world/culture, especially African women. This is the womanist theory.\textsuperscript{186} The latter holds that in effect, White feminists in their efforts to debunk and nullify male supremacy failed to advance and take along their black sisters’ interests and concerns. Consequently it has been rightfully argued by some womanist scholars that White feminists, in their endeavours to redefine the male definitions of women, have done so from their specific contexts. This has eventually excluded African/Black women and other women of colour.\textsuperscript{187}

As asserted by Margaret Kamitsuka, White feminists have a tendency to obscure issues of race and overlook sexualities outside of the dominant heterosexual paradigm in their theorizing and theologizing.\textsuperscript{188} Thus feminist criticism has been accused of concentrating on gender as a singular category without addressing the interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class.\textsuperscript{189} Eventually feminism has been labeled racist. In a rather

\textsuperscript{186} I have already pointed out that the need for the womanist theory arose from feminism’s lopsidedness in its focus on only what was pertinent to middle class white women. The exclusion of other forms of the oppression of women, other than gender inequality rendered feminism inadequate. This is especially with regard to the multiple oppressions in the daily lives of black women. See pp. 28-29 above.
\textsuperscript{187} See Masenya, ‘A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading ’, pp. 147.
\textsuperscript{189} Nyasha Junior, ‘Womanist Biblical Interpretation,’ in Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld eds. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 37-47. Masenya (‘A Bosadi [Womanhood] Reading’, p. 147), shares the same concern as Junior and argues that the feminist approach is concerned with issues of gender but overlooks the real and intimate issues that black women and other women of color are faced with such as, racism, classism and sexism. Renita J. Weems (‘Re-reading for Liberation:
radical manner, Heyward Carter talks about what she terms the dreadful, devastating dimensions of White women’s unexplained and unacknowledged racism.\textsuperscript{190} She claims further that for White people, including White feminists, racism is like the air we breathe.\textsuperscript{191} However, what is important for my purposes here is that, feminism has excluded, whether intentionally or otherwise, the experiences and interests of black women and other women of colour.

The situation is well captured by Awa Thiam when she boldly asserts that ‘women are the Blacks of the human race. Can they tell us then what and who are Black women? Blacks of the Blacks of the human race?’\textsuperscript{192} Karen Baker-Fletcher similarly insists that ‘if humankind has been conceived as ‘man,’ to the exclusion of women, woman has been conceived as White women to the exclusion of woman of African descent.’\textsuperscript{193} This is the point of entry for the womanist theory as it seeks to correct the error or oversight by feminism. What then are the main precepts and aims of womanism/womanist theory and how might it be helpful in my reading of Prov. 31:10-31?

\textsuperscript{191} Carter, ‘Womanism and Feminism,’ p. 181.
1.2.1.1. What has Womanism/Womanist theory to Offer?

Baker-Fletcher maintains that a womanist prefers women’s culture but she is not a separatist. She is concerned with both issues of sexism and racism. Continuing the same slant, Monica Coleman asserts that ‘the term ‘womanist’ allows Black women (and other women of color) to affirm their identity as black/of colour while also owning a connection with feminism’. She explains further that the womanist theory is a response to sexism in Black theology and racism in feminist theology. It expresses a global anti-oppressionist perspective that is rooted in the praxis of everyday women of color. As purported by Butler, womanism breaks down the class barriers of feminism and creates a discourse that involves women of various classes. It also breaks down barriers of races, colors, religions and sexual orientations, allowing non-White women to identify with its concepts. Consequently womanism aims to navigate and reconfigure channels to advance Black women and other women of colour’s voices and experiences in theological discussions. These channels, as expressed by Carter, were previously marked by generations of largely White Euroamerican men. Sadder still, Black male theologians also failed to advance Black women’s interests.

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200 Carter, ‘Womanism and Feminism,’ p. 181
In a nutshell, womanist theory analyses texts in the light of the multiple oppression of racism, sexism and classism that characterize the experiences of many African women and other women of colour.\footnote{202 Coleman, ‘Process Thought and Womanist Theology’, p. 5.} It is the empowering assertion of the Black and other women of colour’s voices.\footnote{203 Linda E. Thomas, ‘Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and A New Anthropological Paradigm’, p. 1 online: http://www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm} Its starting point is that the categories of life which other women outside of the Western culture deal with daily (such as; race, womanhood, political economy, sexism, classism) are intricately woven into the space they occupy as human beings in the world.\footnote{204 Thomas, ‘Womanist Theology’, p. 1.} It is therefore mandatory to take such experiences into consideration in our analysis and interpretation of especially biblical texts if we are to impact on the lives these women. This is the goal of the womanist theory.

To this end, I seek to employ the designation womanist, as an indication that I endeavour to read Prov. 31:10-31 from my perspective and social location\footnote{205 The term social location will be explained shortly.} as a Black (Motswana) woman. It has provided me with a hermeneutic from which my voice may speak ‘about the complicated and wonderfully ‘adventurous’ reality of being embodied black and woman.’\footnote{206 Kelly Brown Douglas, ‘Twenty Years a Womanist: An affirming Challenge,’ in Deeper shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society ed. Stacey M. Flyod- Thomas Stacey (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 145-157.} To adopt Kelly Brown Douglas’ description, the womanist theory gives me a place from which to speak and hence gives me a voice.\footnote{207 Douglas, ‘Twenty Years a Womanist,’ p. 146.} It allows me the opportunity to speak out of my own experiences of pain and struggle and to appreciate these in my reading of Prov. 31:10-31. Significantly, the womanist hermeneutic does not only give me the affirmation of my voice but also lets me realize that my reading and interpretation of texts, including that of Prov. 31:10-31, will inevitably bear traces of my experiences whether overtly or covertly.
Such an acknowledgement and awareness is necessary for a self-conscious and self-critical reading and interpretation of the text. This will in turn help me to appreciate the multiple nuances that may be thickly interwoven into the text so that there will be no glamorization of my experiences or of the text.

It is important to note here that while the womanist theory integrates multiple oppressions experienced especially by African women, (as elaborated in the preceding discussion) I will limit my scope to womanism’s subversion of patriarchy. This is based on my experience as a Motswana woman. It shall be shown in the discussion of my social location in the next chapter that patriarchy needs to be addressed first as it is core to all other oppressions experienced by women including African women. We will next move onto defining the socio-rhetorical approach.

1.2.2. Socio-rhetorical Approach Defined

Socio-rhetorical criticism as the name suggests, is a combination of two approaches to the biblical text that until recently have been utilized independently of each other. These are the social scientific/sociological and rhetorical criticisms/approaches. Social scientific criticism seeks to understand the social and cultural issues behind the text while rhetorical

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criticism seeks to discover the strategies of effective persuasion employed by the author of the text. The two approaches may have been around for a long time, but their combination under the banner socio-rhetorical interpretation/criticism is fairly new, with its origins traceable to Vernon K. Robbins’s 1975 article entitled ‘The We Passages in Acts and Ancient Sea Voyages’. However, Robbins himself claims to have introduced the term ‘socio-rhetorical’ only in 1984 in ‘Jesus the Teacher’. Whatever the case, Robbins is recognized as the pioneer, creator and up-holder of socio-rhetorical interpretation. Consequently, this study bases itself on Robbins’ socio-rhetorical analysis; what it is and as adapted and applied to the text of Prov. 31:10-31.

Exegesis of 1Peter, Its Situation and Strategy [Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, [1989], pp. 7-8), asserts that under sociological analysis the social and cultural factors that played a part in the lives of authors and readers of New Testament must be recognized. That is, the method presupposes that a text (New Testament for example) is the product of historical, social and cultural conditioning and that these must be considered in the interpretive process. Also see Dale B. Martin, ‘Social-Scientific Criticism’ in To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application ed. Steven L Mays et.al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 125.

It is crucial to point out that Robbins has continued to work on the socio-rhetorical theory over time until recently.\textsuperscript{215} As a result there are some observable developments that have taken place since his three main text books.\textsuperscript{216} In recognition and appreciation of Robbins’ continuing work on the theory, Gowler, in his introduction to Robbins’s recent work, \textit{(Sea Voyages and Beyond)}, maintains that:

This volume primarily focuses on the methodological progression in socio-rhetorical analysis that led to 1) the emergence, delineation and exploration of the five (or four) textures and 2) the initial stages of the emergence and investigation of multiple rhetorolects within Early Christian Discourse.\textsuperscript{217}

Due to the fact that the socio-rhetorical theory has continued to develop over the years there has been some modifications to it. For instance, in his first major publication on the methodology, \textit{The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse}, Robbins introduces only four textures from which the text may be approached. These are the inner, inter, social and cultural, and ideological textures.\textsuperscript{218} In the second text on the subject, \textit{Exploring the Texture of Texts}, published the same year (1996), Robbins introduces another texture in addition to the initial four, namely the sacred texture.\textsuperscript{219} In the more recent publication, \textit{Sea Voyages and Beyond} (2010), Robbins omits the sacred texture in his discussion of the textures.\textsuperscript{220} Moreover, Robbins purports that interpreters may not always explore all of the textures of a

\textsuperscript{215} Gowler et.al, \textit{Fabrics of Discourse}, p. vii.
\textsuperscript{216} Robbins, \textit{Exploring the Texture of Texts; The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse; Sea Voyages and Beyond}.
\textsuperscript{219} Robbins, \textit{Exploring the Texture of Texts}, pp 4, 120-130.
\textsuperscript{220} Robbins, \textit{Sea Voyages and Beyond}, pp. 291-322.
According to Robbins, a socio-rhetorical approach analyses the text as a strategic statement in a situation characterized by ‘webs of significance.’ By so saying, Robbins explains the concept intrinsic to the socio-rhetorical theory, namely that it brings into the interpretive process insights from sociological/social-scientific method with its insistence on the text as a social, cultural, religious and ideological discourse. It also leans on the literary traditions with their interest on the study and analysis of rhetorical devices both in the world of the text as well as of the interpreter. That is, socio-rhetorical interpretation attempts to create a dialogical environment for analytical strategies from widely different arenas of investigation. In summary, socio-rhetorical analysis’ dialogue invites a wide range of historical, social, cultural, ideological and psychological phenomena into theological reflection and construction.

Robbins further explains that like an intricately woven tapestry, a text contains complex patterns and images. Looked at from only one way however, the text exhibits a very

221 Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, p. 6.
222 Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, p. 6.
223 Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, p. 6.
224 Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, p. 6.
225 Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, p. 6.
limited range of its texture.\textsuperscript{228} Therefore, by changing the interpreter’s angle a number of times, socio-rhetorical analysis enables the interpreter to bring multiple textures of the text into view.\textsuperscript{229} Thus the approach allows the critical exegete to adopt several points from which to explore the text. These include the inner, inter, social and cultural, ideological and sacred textures.\textsuperscript{230} Notably, due to the intricately woven nature of texts, the different textures suggested by Robbins above, are often intertwined and overlapping. Therefore in exploring the text for the different textures, it is likely that there will be some repetitions of certain ideas and concepts. This is because when interpreters are at work in one texture of the text, presuppositions about the other textures are at work in the analysis and interpretation.\textsuperscript{231} What is important is that, under each texture, attention is paid to certain nuances of the text as opposed to the others.

A brief description of each of the above mentioned textures will be given in what follows. I will also spell out the particular aspects that will be focused on in the analysis of Prov. 31:10-31 under each texture.

1.2.2.1. Inner Texture: Every Reading has a subtext\textsuperscript{232}

Inner texture of a text refers to the various ways the text employs language to achieve communication.\textsuperscript{233} Under this texture, words and phrases play an important role in assisting

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{228} Robbins, Exploring Texture of texts, p. 2.
\bibitem{229} Robbins, Exploring Texture of texts, p. 2.
\bibitem{230} Robbins, Jesus the Teacher, pp. 1-2; Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 3.
\bibitem{232} Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 291.
\end{thebibliography}
the exegete to discern structures, meanings and meaning-effects in a text. Robbins initially identified various types of inner texture which may be summarized as follows: a) the linguistic patterns within a text known as the repetitive and progressive textures, b) the structural elements of a text called the open-middle-closing textures, c) the specific manner in which the text aims to persuade its readers, known as the argumentative texture, d) the voices through which the text speaks, called the narrational texture, e) the way the language of a text evokes feelings, emotions, or senses that are located in different parts of the body, known as sensory-aesthetic texture.

However, in his recent work on socio-rhetorical interpretation, Robbins suggests that an important aspect of inner texture analysis is to establish, on the basis of sign repetition and progression, the beginning, middle and end of a span of text. He maintains that any strategies of analysis and interpretation, from simple repetition of words and phrases, to the more subtle argumentative strategies, contribute to readings of the inner texture of a text. Simplified therefore, inner texture refers to the process of focusing on a text in order to discover its literary and rhetorical techniques. In this case, the analysis of the text’s literary technique involves establishing its beginning, middle and end. Analysis of the rhetorical technique involves examining the repetitive nature of the text which sheds light on the argumentative strategy used by the author to persuade the audience. Therefore, my analysis of the inner texture of Prov. 31:10-31 will be narrowed down to these two main aspects of the inner texture, namely, its literary and rhetorical nature.

238 Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 292.
My task will be, on one hand, to establish the text’s literary structure by first exploring those structures previously suggested by other scholars, and then proposing my own division of the text’s literary structure. On the other hand, a second step of my analysis will involve an exploration of the rhetorical nature of Prov. 31:10-31. This will be narrowed down to the text’s use of techniques such as repetitions/parallelisms, inclusios and trasitios, chiasms and other rhetorical techniques associated/common to poetry that may become apparent as the analysis progresses.\(^{239}\)

1.2.2.2. Inter Texture: Every Comparison has Boundaries\(^{240}\)

It is worth noting that the concept of intertexture is neither new nor peculiar to Robbins. Other scholars have also dealt with the inevitable inter-relatedness of texts with others and with reality. These include among others, scholars like Julia Kristiva,\(^{241}\) Patricia Tull\(^{242}\) and Ellen van Wolde.\(^{243}\) However, this particular study has adopted and will use Robbins’ intertexture analysis as part of the socio-rhetorical method of reading our text.


\(^{240}\) Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 299.


\(^{242}\) Patricia K. Tull, ‘Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality’, in To Each its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application eds. Steven L. McKenzie et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 165. Tull refers to the interconnectedness, and hence, the shared webs of meaning and associations between texts as intertextuality.

\(^{243}\) Ellen van Wolde, ‘Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar’ in A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies eds Athalya Brenner et al., (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,
Robbins’ definition of intertexture is very detailed but it can be summed up as an analysis of the interaction and conversation between the text in question and other texts. It is primarily concerned with how language from other texts has been reshaped to give it meaning in a new text/context. Robbins insists that answers to the following questions are the core to intertextual analysis:

1. From where has this text adopted its language?
2. With what texts does this text stand in dialogue?

My intertextual reading of Prov. 31:10-31 will narrow its scope to finding answers to the aforementioned questions. This is essentially a comparison of the language of the text with that of other texts. Notably, language from other texts can be used in another in many different ways. For this reason Robbins has observed that in analysing texts in comparison to others, interpreters deal with the following:

1. Recitation which, as the term implies, is reciting or even quoting directly from another text.

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1997), pp. 426-451. Van Wolde, maintains that texts stand in relation to other texts as well as to reality and this she calls intertextuality.
244 For a more detailed description of this texture refer to Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, pp. 30-33; *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, pp. 40-58; *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, pp. 299-305.
246 Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 299.
248 Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, p. 33; *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, p. 41; *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 299.
2. Recontextualization which is the placing of attributed narration or speech in a new context without stating its previous attribution.\textsuperscript{249}

3. Reconfiguration which refers to recounting a situation in a manner that makes the latter new in relation to a previous event.\textsuperscript{250} The new event replaces or even outshines the previous one making it a foreshadowing of the latter.\textsuperscript{251}

4. Thematic elaboration whereby the themes introduced/ hinted at in one text are developed and argued out in another.\textsuperscript{252}

5. Echo which is simply what is echoed in the text in relation to others.\textsuperscript{253}

The analysis will pay attention to those aspects of the intertexture that are deemed relevant to the specific research questions behind this study.\textsuperscript{254} Intertextual boundaries will be demarcated to include a sample of texts that are either earlier or contemporaneous with Prov. 31:10-31,\textsuperscript{255} display parallels with it, and are in some ways aligned to the general flavour of womanist inclinations.

Worth mentioning is that, in this study, a translation of the text, which will be done in chapter 2, will involve a study of words and phrases based on their use elsewhere in the Hebrew

\textsuperscript{249} Robbins, \textit{The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse}, p 33; Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 48; Sea, Voyages and Beyond, p. 300.

\textsuperscript{250} Robbins, \textit{The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse}, p. 33; Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 48; Sea, Voyages and Beyond, p. 300.

\textsuperscript{251} Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{252} Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, pp. 52 and 43.


\textsuperscript{254} These are; how previous studies have defined the woman of Prov. 31:10-31; what they say about her portrayal and what implications for real life (if any) have they attributed to having a woman of her caliber.

\textsuperscript{255} Robbins states that inter textual reading should take place between a text and the fore grounded others. This implies that the texts selected for the analysis should be those that are already existing and hence earlier or contemporaneous ones. They should also be the closest, perhaps in the subject matter or content, to the text in question. See Robbins, \textit{The Early Tapestry of Christian Discourse}, p. 97.
Bible, as well as in the specific context of Prov. 31:10-31. The meanings established through the translation, will permeate the entire study so that the rest of the textures to be analysed (inner, inter, socio-cultural and ideological textures) will draw from the translation. Thus my analysis of the inter texture of Prov. 31:10-31 will not so much focus on where the words in the text have come from, except for a selected vocabulary deemed core to the intertextual endeavour. Instead my focus will be more on the how the language, ideas and themes from selected texts have been recounted, recontextualized and reconfigured in the text of Prov. 31:10-31. This is basically the analysis of the echoes of other texts in the text of Prov. 31:10-31.

1.2.2.3. Social and Cultural Texture: Every Meaning has a Context

As the phrase implies, the social and cultural texture involves an investigation into the socio-cultural systems and institutions, cultural alliances and conflicts evoked by the language of the text. Robbins initially promoted several sub-textures of this texture; but in his latest text he has simplified the texture by explaining it thus:

Social and cultural systems and institutions are common topics, those that spun all subject matter in society and culture. Cultural alliances and conflicts

\[256\] Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 299. Here Robbins explicates inter texture by asking, ‘from where has this passage/text adopted its language? And with what does this text stand in dialogue? However because these questions will have been answered earlier in chapter two as part of my translation of the text, the analysis will pay more attention to how the words have been used in the text.

\[257\] Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 305.

\[258\] Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 305.

\[259\] For a detailed discussion on the sub-textures of social and cultural texture refer to Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, pp. 72-89.
are final ‘topics’, those that function specifically to make one’s own case to other people. The topics functioning together evoke the social and cultural nature of a particular discourse. 260

Simplified, social and cultural texture can be understood as an investigation into the world of the text in order to establish three main aspects of it. These are: 1) the social and cultural context of the text, 2) how the text as part of that context reflects, responds or critiques it and 3) what the text wishes to impart or nurture among its readers. 261

Consequently, texts are contextually located in terms of social and cultural backgrounds that not only produced those texts but, inevitably influenced them in different ways and to varying degrees. Knowledge of such backgrounds is important for understanding texts. Thus to do this justice, an interpretation of texts requires one to interact with the social and cultural values, beliefs, and customs of the people who wrote and received the text(s) in question. 262

The question is; how can modern interpreters get knowledge of the socio-cultural background of biblical texts?

To resolve the issue, I will explore other texts thought to be approximately contemporaneous with Prov. 31:10-31. This is in accordance with Robbins’ analysis of the social and cultural texture in which he has suggested that one way to get knowledge about the distinctive

260 Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 305.
261 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, pp. 71 -72; Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 305.
262 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 1.
features of a text is to compare it with others. The exercise however, should not be confused with inter texture analysis. The main difference between the two is that inter texture concerns the text’s use of phenomena from other texts, while the social and cultural texture concerns the text’s attitude to its socio-cultural context. Some of the socio-cultural context of the text can be implied from other contemporaneous texts and hence the comparison.

The assumption is that the text’s similarities as well as differences with other contemporary texts can give hints to the social, cultural frame of reference, world view and common knowledge of the people who produced and received the text. This view is shared by other scholars including Herman C. Waetjen who asserts that, when biblical texts are torn from their original contexts, they require some historical mediation in order to overcome the distance between those texts and contemporary-modern readers. Consequently I will endeavour to explore the socio-cultural world of the text in order to bring the reader to the knowledge of the original context of Prov. 31:10-31. This will in turn help us to determine whether the text is a critique or an upholder of these socio-cultural values, norms and beliefs especially with regard to women and their status in the socio-cultural stratum.

I need to note that not all the biblical texts assumedly contemporaneous with Prov. 31:10-31 will be investigated. The choice of which texts will be utilized for the purpose of this chapter.

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263 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, pp. 91-92.
264 See the meaning of intertexture on pp. 37-40 above.
265 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 3.
266 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 3.
is based on their relevance to the womanist theory that provides the overall flavour for this study. It is with the insights gained from such exploration that Prov. 31:10-31 will then be analysed further to see to what extent it is a part of the social and cultural context, how it responds/criticizes the very context as well as to discern its main precepts.

1.2.2.4. Ideological Texture: Every Theology has a Politics

Robbins, citing Terry Eagleton, defines ideology as,

The ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in..., those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power.

Robbins maintains that a person’s ideology involves her/his conscious/unconscious enactment of presuppositions, dispositions and values held in common with other people.

Therefore, ideological texture concerns the biases, opinions, preferences and stereotypes of a particular writer or reader. Robbins elucidates that, in the ideological analysis of texts, interpretation includes presuppositions, implicit or explicit, about the author, the text and the

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268 Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 315.
270 Robbins, The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse, p. 36; Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 315.
271 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 95.
reader. He further hypothesizes that between the text and the world of the interpreter lies the world of the author who wrote the text.

Consequently, when reading for ideological texture, the interpreter’s main task is twofold: First, it involves finding both the interests of the author and how those interests are argued out in the text. The question is what and whose self-interests are being negotiated in the text and to whose benefit? Basically, as DeSilva puts it, ideological analysis probes into questions of ‘what goals drive the author and how the author uses the text to achieve such goals?’ Second, the interpreter needs to explore the reader’s ideological standpoint. This cannot be ignored for it influences in some ways the reading and interpretive process. In the end, ideological texture analysis brings an interaction between the ideology of the text (which derives from the socio-cultural world of the author), and that of the reader (who is also a product of her/his socio-cultural world). Thus, Robbins concludes that both texts and interpretations are symbolic actions that create history, society, culture and ideology, and I will add; they are also products of the same.

As usual Robbins originally promoted several kinds of ideological sub-textures that the interpreter may adopt under this texture analysis. However I will not go into defining each

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275 Robbins, *Sea Voyages and Beyond*, p. 315.
278 Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, p. 40. Robbins emphasizes that interaction between the world of the author and the world of the interpreter represents an environment in which socio-rhetorical criticism explores and interprets a text.
280 For a more detailed discussion of the sub-textures of the ideological texture refer to Robbins, *Exploring the*
of them but will instead give a summary of what is at the core of ideological texture. The gist of the matter here is that, the author’s personal agendas, aims and biases as evident in the text are in view, as well as those of the interpreter which can be traced in the interpretation.

It is especially here that the influence of my social location will become perceivable in my reading and interpretation. Worth noting is that, even though Robbins has suggested that the reader/interpreter’s social location should be explored when doing ideological texture analysis,\textsuperscript{281} I will discuss my social location under preliminary issues in chapter 2. This is because I believe that the social location of the interpreter, which in turn is indicative of their ideologies, permeates all of her/his readings and analysis. Therefore my social location will be one of the preliminary issues so as to orient the reader toward an informed understanding of what is core to my interpretation/analysis of the text. That is, I consider my social location part of the background of my analysis. Moreover, it is also here that the womanist approach that represents my ideological stand point will be more clearly manifested in the interpretation of Prov. 31:10-31. This is in concurrence with Robbins’ ideological analysis which incorporates the reader/interpreter’s ideological background in the interpretation.\textsuperscript{282} Robbins in fact insists that interpreters should be aware of their own social location and personal interests before they can attempt to approach those embodied by the text.\textsuperscript{283} After all, ‘ideology generates every text and every interpretation.’\textsuperscript{284}

\textit{Texture of Texts}, pp. 96-144.
\textsuperscript{281} Robbins, \textit{Exploring the Texture of Texts}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{282} See the discussion on p. 43 above.
\textsuperscript{283} Robbins, \textit{Exploring the Texture of Texts}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{284} Robbins, \textit{Exploring the Texture of Texts}, p. 6.
The following issues of concern will be explored: 1) the possible ideological background of the author so that the text’s ‘politics’ may be established; 2) a close reading of the text of Prov. 31:10-31 in order to establish the construction of the female other in the text, to see how her identity is shaped and reinforced by the ideologies held by the author/poet.

1.2.2.5. Sacred Texture

The analysis of the sacred texture involves a systematic inquiry into the dynamics of relationships between the human and the divine. It becomes visible in the narrator and/characters’ communication about gods, holy persons, spiritual beings and any such phenomena. Robbins further asserts that these aspects of a text are embedded deeply in the other textures, that is, as an interpreter works carefully with the language of the text, its relation to other texts, the socio-cultural and ideological nature of life exhibited by a text, “a thick description of the sacred texture of a text emerges”. Consequently, insights learnt from the preceding textures are woven together to expose the sacred texture of the text.

This particular study will however not go through the tautological task of trying to deal separately with the sacred texture of the text which is itself a sacred text. The point is that when analysing Prov. 31:10-31 for inner, inter, social and cultural, and ideological, textures one is already analysing its sacred texture in that as a sacred text its language, context and

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285 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 4.
286 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p.120.
287 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 130.
ideology is necessarily sacred and hence the sacred texture permeates all the other textures to some extent making it impossible to separate its sacred texture into an isolated analysis.

While the rest of the textures are intricately intertwined and overlapping with each other, the sacred texture of what is already sacred cannot be done without complete tautology of what has already been explored in the other textures and hence it is deemed an unnecessary exercise in this study. I believe it is for the same reasons as given here that Robbins himself in his major publications, utilized in this study, refers only one time out of three to the sacred texture.\textsuperscript{288} Moreover, Robbins admits that it is not always viable or even necessary to explore all socio-rhetorical textures in any one text at a given time.\textsuperscript{289} The choice of what textures to analyse is dependent on many factors including, the nature of the text, goals of the interpreter as well as questions the interpreter brings to the text.

1.2.3. Summary and Justification of the Methodology of Study

As discernible from the preceding discussions, Socio-rhetorical womanist criticism is a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach to texts. It is a method comprised of different theories of reading texts. The theories are integrated to demonstrate awareness and appreciation of the complex webs/netting within which any interpretation occurs. The socio-

\textsuperscript{288} See Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, pp. 120-129. This is the one place he deals with the Sacred texture. In his other two publications he omits it. See his *The Tapestry of Christian Discourse* and *Sea Voyages and Beyond*. David A. deSilva, (An Introduction, pp. 23-25) too does not make reference to the sacred texture.\textsuperscript{289} Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, p. 2. Robbins admits that no one interpreter will ever use all of the resources of socio-rhetorical method in any one interpretation. Interpreters have the choice to work especially energetically on one or two aspects of a text. DeSilva (An Introduction, p. 25) likewise maintains that an interpreter will not always use all the resources of socio-rhetorical interpretation when studying every passage, some skills are more suited to one kind of text than to another.
rhetorical womanist method may be summarized into two main parts, namely socio-rhetorical and womanist approaches.

Firstly, socio-rhetorical interpretation is itself an integrated method, which takes several aspects surrounding both the production and reception of a text into consideration in the interpretive process. These are what Robbins calls ‘webs of significance’ and they are; the inner, inter, social and cultural, ideological and sacred textures. DeSilva sums the abovementioned textures in the following:

a) Inner texture involves a detailed analysis of the text itself. It includes textual criticism, lexical analysis, grammatical analysis, literary context, ‘repetitive texture’, rhetorical criticism and genre analysis.\textsuperscript{290} These however boil down to the literary and rhetorical analysis.

b) Intertexture represents the text in conversation with other ‘texts’. It includes examining any quotation or allusion to other texts.\textsuperscript{291}

c) Social and cultural texture is the intersection of a text and its world. This includes examining the world of the author/original audience in order to enhance our understanding of the text.\textsuperscript{292} In the end, we want to find out whether the text conforms or critiques the socio-cultural norms and values of its original setting.

d) Ideological texture investigates the agendas of authors and interpreters. This involves asking what the goals of the author are, and examining how they use the

\textsuperscript{290}DeSilva, \textit{An Introduction}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{291}DeSilva, \textit{An Introduction}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{292}DeSilva, \textit{An Introduction}, pp. 24-25.
text to achieve their goals. It also asks whether the reader/interpreters’ own agendas or presuppositions have influenced their interpretation of the text.\(^{293}\)

Secondly, a womanist approach, like the socio-rhetorical approach takes several aspects into consideration when approaching texts. As already explained above, it is an affirmation of the voice of non-White women in the interpretation of texts. It is therefore, an affirmation of my voice in contributing to the on-going scholarly debate regarding Prov. 31:10-31.\(^{294}\) It appreciates and incorporates within the interpretive process both the ideological standpoint of the writer (as traceable in the text itself) and that of the reader/interpreter (as discernible in their interpretation). The womanist method aims to bring to the forefront perspectives, experiences and interests of Black women and other non-White women. It therefore appreciates the social location of non-White women. Analysing texts from a womanist perspective gives the exegete/interpreter an opportunity to ‘deconstruct’\(^{295}\) the text in order to discover its ideological thread that places one gender (male) and one race (white) at an advantage over others in terms of power distribution. It also allows the reader an opportunity to speak with authority about their personal and intimate struggles as Black (or non-White) and woman. Insights gleaned from the exercise is valuable to the interpreter in that the otherwise covert agendas of both the writer and the interpreter become exposed and can be used as filters towards a ‘justice reading’ of the text. As correctly asserted by deSilva, when we explore our own ideologies and biases (as readers/interpreters) more openly, we are freed

\(^{293}\) DeSilva, *An Introduction*, pp. 25. While deSilva maintains that ideological texture analysis probes into questions of whether the readers/interpreters’ agendas and presuppositions influence their reading/interpretation adversely, I prefer not to place any value judgement on it at this stage. I am convinced that our, i.e. the readers/interpreters’ ideologies may influence the interpretive process either positively or negatively.

\(^{294}\) Refer to the history of interpretation above.

\(^{295}\) The term ‘deconstruct’ is adopted from Steven D. Moore’s ‘Deconstructive Criticism’ in *Mark and Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 84-102.
to pursue self-critical interpretations. In that way, our ideological perceptions can be used positively in our reading and interpretations because we are aware of them.

It can be concluded that, combined, the methods of socio-rhetorical and womanist approaches are capable of producing a detailed, and hence a rich and well informed/rounded, interpretation of the text. These methods are particularly suited for each other given that under socio-rhetorical interpretation’s ideological texture, the reader’s ideological context is especially integrated in the interpretation. Therefore by merging the womanist approach with Robbins’ socio-rhetorical analysis, I have not linked unrelated approaches but have brought my ideological stand point to the fore as a means to self-critical approach.

Moreover, the womanist socio-rhetorical interpretation, while allowing multiple textures of the text to be scrutinized, pays particular attention, throughout, to the inevitable ideological nature of Prov. 31:10-31. This arises from its being a text about a woman from a man/men’s perspective in a particular historical circumstance. Therefore it is likely that this research will accomplish a well-rounded meaning of Prov. 31:10-31. Given the multidimensional tools of investigation (the socio-rhetorical and womanist approaches) to be utilized in the analysis, one hopes to achieve what Robbins would call ‘a thick interpretation of the text’. Ultimately underlying the womanist socio-rhetorical interpretation is both an exegetical and hermeneutical analysis which is likely to yield rich insights into the text.

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Pointedly, the socio-rhetorical womanist reading of Prov. 31:10-31 places emphasis on the ideological texture, as one that is subtly embedded within all the other textures; permeating the text unabatedly, and hence may not just be addressed under ideological texture as otherwise implied by Robbins.\(^{299}\) That is, when assessing the language of the text (inner texture), the text’s interrelatedness to earlier or contemporaneous others (inter texture), the text’s socio-cultural background (social and cultural texture), clues to the personal agendas of both the producer and the receiver of the text (ideological texture), comes to the fore. The womanist flavour keeps the researcher alert to their personal presuppositions as well as those of the writer of the text. Significantly I endeavour to attain a liberative and empowering message of the text that will impact and benefit not just women but men as well.

In summary, we need to note that the exegetical method of socio-rhetorical analysis (with its multiple texture analysis) and the hermeneutical background of womanist reading will at all times permeate my reading and interpretation of Prov. 31:10-31. Therefore, whether stated explicitly or not, the reader must bear in mind that my reading and interpretation in this study, is predominantly indebted to my chosen methodologies as stated throughout this chapter. The reader should also be aware that, due to the inter-relatedness and even overlapping nature of the textures of the text, (as pointed out in the preceding discussions) there will be instances in the thesis where unavoidable repetitions will show. Nonetheless all effort is made to avoid unnecessary tautology in the unfolding of the different textures of Prov. 31:10-31.

\(^{299}\) Robbins in his socio-rhetorical interpretation does not emphasize or directly indicate/state that the ideological texture permeates and hovers around all the other textures of a text in ways that need to be honestly and critically incorporated in the analysis of each texture. He however treats this texture as one of the textures that like the rest of the others contributes to the ‘intricately woven tapestry’ of texts, admitting that these textures are intertwined and overlapping.
1.3. An Overview of the Chapters

My Socio-rhetorical Womanist Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31 will proceed in the following way:

Chapter 2: Preliminary Issues to the Study. In this chapter I define and discuss my social location to provide the reader with an understanding of whom I am and where I am coming from in my interpretation of Prov. 31:10-31. I will also provide my own translation of the text. The process of translation is based on how certain words, which in my opinion are key to the text of Prov. 31:10-31, have been used elsewhere in the Hebrew bible (which is the general context of our text) as well as in the text itself. A note on the presumed date of the composition of Prov. 31:10-31 is also included in this chapter. The aforementioned issues (discussed in this chapter) are regarded as an essential starting point to the womanist socio-rhetorical analysis of Prov. 31:10-31. In addition to being a part of the intricate environment surrounding the analysis and interpretation of the text, the factors discussed in this chapter will also inevitably permeate the entire analysis.

Chapter 3: Inner texture Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31. The focus here is on the inner make-up of Prov. 31:10-31 and this is primarily the inter-play of literary and rhetorical strategies within the text. That is, this chapter examines the literary structure of our text. It also examines the rhetorical strategy of parallelism/repetition with its different strands of *transios*, *inclusios* and chiasms.
Chapter 4: Intertexture of Prov. 31:10-31. The chapter explores the interactive relationship between Prov. 31:10-31 and three other texts, namely, the book of Ruth, Prov. 1-9 and Prov. 12:4. It investigates how the text of Prov. 31:10-31 alludes to, echoes, recites or reconfigures the language used in the above mentioned texts. In other words, it addresses the question of what meaning-effects the author arrives at in Prov. 31:10-31 by adopting and reshaping phenomena from other texts.

Chapter 5: Social and Cultural Texture Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31. Here the text is studied against/within its socio-cultural matrix. The analysis examines contemporaneous texts from the post-exilic/Persian period searching for women in the texts. The texts of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther and Proverbs 1-9 are examined for the said purposes. The aim is to establish the general feel of how women were treated and what position they were allotted in the socio-cultural world of the text and how this is reflected in or reshaped by Prov. 31:10-31.

Chapter 6: Ideological Texture of Prov. 31:10-31. By appreciating that a text is a means through which the author advances her/his personal agendas, this chapter, begins with an exploration of possible ideologies of the author. It then proceeds by expressly and directly incorporating my ideological background into the interpretive process. Such background is represented in the womanist theory, nuances of which are traceable to my social location.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and implications. This chapter provides a detailed summary of the findings of the different chapters of this thesis. It also highlights the implications of the
womanist socio-rhetorical reading of Prov. 31:10-31 as particularly important for the subversion of patriarchy.
Chapter 2: Preliminary Considerations

Prior to the unfolding of a womanist socio-rhetorical reading of Prov. 31:10-31, the focus of this study, there are a few issues that require attention. These issues will form the backdrop to the entire study and these are: my social location as the present researcher, my translation of the text of Prov. 31:10-31 and a consideration of the date of composition of the text. A discussion of these issues early in the investigation of a womanist socio-rhetorical reading of Prov. 31:10-31 is aimed at orientating the reader to the possible factors that may have shaped the research as a whole leading to certain conclusions being drawn and others discarded.

2.1. Social Location

I will begin with a description of my social location. The description is an important starting point in that it will (hopefully) allow the reader an opportunity to enter the world of the researcher, present, in order to understand some of the factors that may have shaped me and hence my reading. Furthermore, acknowledging my social location and hence my contextual background and standpoint is important as it allows me to work self-consciously within clearly defined hermeneutics. What then is social location?

2.1.1. Defining Social location
Robbins points out that he uses the term ‘social location’ instead of ‘context’ because the latter is too broad. In other words, social location is ‘context’ simplified/specified. Robbins further defines social location as a position in a social system which reflects a world view or a socially constructed province of meaning. Thus social location defines an individual’s place and position in the social stratum and that position itself becomes a defining factor for the individual. The assumption is that all individuals are located in the world and in their societies in terms of relationships, institutions, class, race, ethnicity, gender, education, religion, sexual orientation and many other factors that may be used to categorize people in society. All these defining factors in turn shape us as individuals; they define our framework of reference, our perspectives on life and how we make sense of reality including, as in my case, our reading and interpretation of texts.

As radically and yet correctly argued by Musa Dube, our social location empowers us differently so that we are either powerful or powerless depending on where we are and the people with us, the institutions we belong to, and the values that society attaches to all these areas of our social locations. Importantly our status as powerful or powerless also influences our perspective on life and hence our meaning creating processes, whether it is in reading texts or perceiving through other means of perception. Herman C. Waetjen recapitulates this stance in the following words:

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The historicity of understanding, therefore, is distinguished by the distinctive cultural horizon into which one has been socialized; establishment of an identity structure that is dialectically a production of a particular society and the individual self; and systems of signs, including language, that both constitutes and communicates the unique reality of the world that is inhabited.⁵

Therefore we can safely conclude that factors of our social location and hence our socializations (in terms of our gender, race, class, religion etc.) generate and shape our ideologies and creeds⁶ that inevitably influence our evaluative process. Consequently social location is an important factor especially in biblical interpretation for it is ‘like a virus that though recognized and treated still courses unabated’.⁷ This means that we can never truly/completely separate or exclude ourselves from our socializations,⁸ and life experiences, nor the effects of such on our world views. On the other hand we can do justice to both ourselves and the texts we read if we consciously acknowledge our social locations and use them as filters in the interpretive enterprise. In summary, factors of our social locations are important as they give us our identity as well as define our subjectivity.


⁶ See Waetjen, ‘Social Location,’’ p. 75.

⁷ Brian K. Blount, Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), p. vii. It is important to note here that while Blount does not specifically use the term ‘social location’ but is rather discussing what he calls cultural/contextual interpretation, he is in a way speaking about social location for as we have seen in Robbins’s definition on p. 55 above, the two are basically one thing. Blount explains that context shapes the creation and use of language so that the meaning derived from language is also shaped by context. Furthermore, in interpreting texts, meaning is established through the interaction of text grammar and concepts with the situation of the language user and hence ‘the situation of the language user may, for our purposes, be termed ‘the language user’s social location.

2.1.2. My Social Location: the Roots of an Identity and Subjectivity

I am a woman born and raised in Botswana. I am the second oldest child in a family of seven children, four boys and three girls. Botswana is a third world country in Africa, a continent characterized by unpleasant issues of diseases, unstable governments, wars and poverty.\(^9\) Remarkably, Botswana has not had wars and is rated among the most economically and politically stable and hence prosperous countries in Africa.\(^10\) Nevertheless she is among the hardest hit by the HIV and AIDS pandemic\(^11\) which as correctly warned by Ronald Nicolson is ‘a medical result of a network of implicit cultural attitudes’.\(^12\) That is, the scourge of HIV and AIDS pandemic in Botswana, as in all of Africa, is especially perpetuated by cultural beliefs, values and norms that are couched within patriarchy.\(^13\) Africa’s patriarchal cultures with their gender-based inequalities leave particularly women in a state of powerlessness rendering them vulnerable and exposed to the HIV and AIDS menace. Therefore the scourge (HIV and AIDS) in all of Africa has ‘a woman face’.\(^14\) In summary, ‘African women

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\(^10\)Dube, ‘Social Location’, p. 105.


\(^13\)See Mercy A. Oduoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 10. Oduoyoye summarizes Africa’s patriarchal situation with its detrimental effects thus: ‘Africa continues to produce structures and systems barren of all creativity, not because her sons who run the affairs of the continent are intellectually impotent but because they use the strength of their manhood on what does not build a living community. Raped by the patriarchal manipulation of the North, Africa now stands in danger of further battering by home-grown patriarchies. Masenya (‘Proverbs 31: 10-31,’ p. 57) points out that African tradition and culture present themselves to women as an oppressive system that has a male-domineering factor. It is a patriarchal system and like all other patriarchal cultures, it has a low view of women.

\(^14\)See Gichaara, ‘Women, Religio-cultural Factors’, p. 188. He argues that the scourge of HIV/AIDS pandemic is particularly thriving among women because of the patriarchal African culture. He further explains that the virus is driven by male predatory sexual behavior while the culture, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, does not allow women to say ‘no’ to male sexual overtures; women are culturally expected to gratify their men’s sexual
suffer under oppressive patriarchal traditions that leave them gasping for breath, faced with multiple challenges of HIV and AIDS, poverty, violence and many other forces of death that stalk them’.  

For instance, in the Botswana culture, women were and are still treated as inferior to men and their status is that of second class citizens in relation to their male counterparts. Girls were and are still socialized to believe that they are inferior and subordinate to boys; they are weak, vulnerable and in need of male protection. They are socialized into the stereotypical roles of wife and mother so that marriage and child bearing are idolized to the extent that anything outside of such roles is of lesser recognition by the traditional society. Boys, on the other hand, are socialized into believing that they are the superior ‘others’. They are to play the roles of bread winner for their families and to be the protectors, the leaders and heads of their households. Dube recapitulates Botswana’s patriarchal status in her assertion that as a woman raising her son, the son will soon have more power than herself on the basis of his gender. That is, being a Motswana woman means being a disempowered other.

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15 Chitando et.al., ‘Weaving Sisterhood,’ p. 22.
16 See Masenya, ‘Proverbs 31:10-31’, p. 58. She recapitulates the situation well in saying that, in African culture, a married woman is valued mainly as a bearer of children, particularly sons. She further explains rightly that little girls are already viewed in terms of their future marriages and hence marriage in this setting becomes an idol so that women will rather opt for polygamy than for celibate lives. Juliana Makuchi Nfa-Abbenyi, (Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997], p. 35) comments that motherhood has been the predominant framework of identity for women in African literature both from the perspective of male writers and female writers. She insists that this is probably because motherhood is so closely linked to understanding African women’s lives and identities within their socio-cultural contexts.
17 It is important to note that the situation of how girls and boys are socialized in the Botswana culture is not particular to Botswana. It is characteristic of other African countries’ cultures as expressed by Gichaara, ‘Women, Religio-cultural Factors’, p. 192. He asserts correctly that in Africa, women are generally perceived as the oppressed class who are taught at an early age that they are entirely vulnerable and needing male protection while, males are taught to think of themselves as invulnerable and above all forms of weakness.
18 Dube, ‘Social Location’, p. 105.
19 The term ‘Motswana’ denotes an individual citizen of Botswana, while ‘Batswana’ refers to two or more ‘Motswana.’
However, in the case of my family, girls and boys were treated equally by our parents. We were given the same opportunities regardless of our gender. My mother particularly insisted that we should all get formal education for she believed in education being the key to a successful future. My mother’s journey, nevertheless, was a different one from the one she envisioned and wanted for all her children, especially, her girl-children. I will briefly recount her journey in order to highlight the patriarchal context that dictated and shaped the lives of women and men in Botswana to the detrimental position occupied by women in the social stratum in the past and to the present.

My mother is third in a family of five children. Born in 1949, her upbringing was very traditional and hence very patriarchal. She considers herself lucky to have received basic primary school education back in the days when that was considered a privilege reserved for the male others. She however was soon given into marriage at nineteen in order for her to occupy her rightful place in society as a wife and mother. My father worked away as a migrant worker in the South African mines and used to come home only once in a year to see his family. Therefore growing up, we only had my mother around to nurture us; the seven children with roughly an age gap of about two years. In addition, my mother was also burdened with ensuring that the family’s economic status was good. She had to do the farming; keeping of small livestock (goats and sheep) and growing crops for subsistence. All that my father contributed was the financial needs of the family, so that we had clothes, and in particular school uniforms. In a nutshell, my mother played the roles of being the sole carer for her children, the household manager and keeper, the producer of food and shelter and
even clothing as she used to sew clothes for us when my father had sent her money to buy material for sowing. She also had to look after the family estate in the absence of my father.

However it goes without saying that all the credit for the successes of the family goes to my father who is designated as the head of the family by society, while my mother is considered to be a subordinate and a subject dependent on him. That is, because of being a woman my mother’s great contribution to the well-being and socio-economic success of the family is taken for granted; it does not elicit any recognition or praise for her. It is worth mentioning that out of the seven children, four made it to the end of high school and three made it to college and university. I particularly excelled at school, becoming the first postgraduate in the family thanks to my mother’s determination and perseverance in ensuring I had access to formal education and for not ‘selling’ me into marriage.

During my teenage days, girls were given into marriage after year seven of primary school and this was particularly for economic reasons. They were married to older men who worked in the South African mines because those men could pay ‘lobola’ (bride price/dowry) and hence enrich the girls’ families. I was lucky that my mother would not let that happen to me or my sisters. I got married at the age of twenty eight and at my own choice. Nevertheless my

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20 The situation discussed here of my mother’s subordinate position in relation to my father is replicated in African cultures in general as explicated by Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 135), who correctly asserts that marriage confers full responsibility and autonomy on a man while the woman remains a subject.

21 I use the term ‘selling’ to express the cultural concept of dowry/bride price (*lobola*/bogadi). Gichaara, ‘Women, Religio-cultural Factors’, p. 195), expresses the concept clearly when he insists that women are an asset as long as they can bring dowry (*lobola*). He adds rightly that this reduces women to the level of expendable commodities, comparable to land, cattle, sheep and goats. I will add that by paying a number of cattle to the family of the bride, the bride groom and his family have purchased the girl, who now belongs first, to her husband and then to his family. This explains why the married woman in Botswana takes on the name of her husband and moves to live with him and his family, either in the same house or in his home town.

marriage was characterized and troubled by the lurking unpleasant effects of the Botswana culture with its patriarchal expectations and definitions of a perfect wife, husband, marriage and family.  

In my marriage I had to endure the position of a subordinate despite the fact that I contributed largely to the financial needs of our household. Because of my education and hence my professional status and financial independence, I particularly had to pay a painful price. Due to societal expectations that the man and not the woman in a marriage is to be the bread winner, I suffered bitter intolerance from my now ex-husband and his family who felt that I was devaluing and diminishing his ‘manliness’ by being an independent woman. To some extent I condoned, perpetuated and upheld the same oppressive patriarchal mores by trying the best I could to keep my subordinate position that however was uncomfortable and detrimental. That is, the overall cultural context and socialization overshadowed my other socialization derived from my education and my mother’s private teaching at home. I knew that it was wrong and unjust for me to be victimized like that but it was hard to act defiantly; I did not want to become a deviant for fear of shame for myself and my family. Culturally I had no right to say ‘no’ to my ex-husband’s rule, including, among others things, no say in matters of sexuality or sex. Consequently I had to endure ‘marital rape’ to the point that it did not matter anymore. I could never talk to anyone about these things because as a married

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23 Musa Dube, ‘Culture, Gender and HIV/AIDS: Understanding and Acting on the Issues’ in HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), p. 84. Dube describes Botswana’s patriarchal cultural definition of these concepts when she maintains that men are constructed as public speakers, thinkers, decision makers and property owners while women are constructed primarily as domestic beings who belong in the domestic sphere of home and kitchen. As already outlined in the preceding discussion, my situation did not conform to any of these culturally constructed definitions and hence the marriage suffered a lot of negative pressure from some members of society who felt it was not a perfect marriage.

24 Gichaara (‘Women, Religio-cultural Factors’, p. 189), discusses these issues at length indicating that particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where Botswana is located, women culturally have very limited powers to say ‘no’ to male sexual overtures.

25 It is worth mentioning here that the concept of marital rape is an inconceivable one in my country up to today.
Motswana woman you have been bought for a price, the dowry, by your husband and his family, rendering you powerless even over your own body.26

Furthermore, in the ten years of my marriage I had to endure being the victim of marital infidelities and gender related domestic violence. There was so much pressure from a society whose expectations were frustrated by the order of things in my marriage. That is, in a society which defines ‘wife’ as weak, vulnerable and dependent on the male other (the husband), it is a challenge for the one married to a woman whose definition defies those set by the society. The society’s construction of male versus female puts both parties under pressure especially the male party if he is not able to satisfy its expectations. In summary, males/men in my culture find themselves particularly under pressure if they have to retain their maleness/manhood according to society’s social construction and definition of such. The feeling of failure and inadequacy on the part of men in many cases leads to resentment of female autonomy and may result in all kinds of violence and evil against autonomous women. Such acts of violence aimed at degrading and humiliating the female other manifests itself in infidelity, homicides and the so called ‘passion killings’. These gender based crimes are rampant in present day Botswana and I cannot help but hold the patriarchal system as responsible for these, at least to some extent, because of the pressures it exerts, especially on its males.

Eventually, however, the time came for me to say ‘no’ to the secret pain and suffering, the oppression and suppression, that was my portion as a wife. My mother’s teaching and wishes

26 Gichaara (‘Women, Religio-cultural Factors’, p. 189) expresses similar sentiments in his assertion that culturally African men hold a misconception that they have a right over women’s bodies.
that my education would empower me to a life different from hers and many other women in that culture had been gasping for a long time under the patriarchal perfect marriage and family, which I tried so hard to keep. However my education and my economic freedom would finally suffice as empowering weapons. Without these I would most likely have been enslaved forever as is the case in many marriages where the wife is doubly handicapped by lack of knowledge and their economic dependency on their ‘cruel’ husbands.

I chose to initiate divorce as the last resort. However my choice to step out was only the beginning of another painful journey of humiliation. Divorce in my culture carries with it a nasty stigma; it is considered a terrible failure on the part of the woman. Culturally women are taught to be tough, to stand for their households especially their marriages against all odds even if it means losing their own lives. However I will not discuss the topic of divorce in Botswana culture in detail for it is worth a research project on its own which is not within the parameters of this study.

To sum up, I am a Motswana professional working class woman; an academic trained in the field of Biblical studies particularly the Hebrew text. I am also a divorced mother of three children. I presently live in Australia as an International, and hence a foreign, student in a country whose culture and lifestyle is different from my own. I live with my three children and have to fend for their everyday needs all on my own. All these factors of my life and lived experiences, as discussed above, make up my social location. My rich world of experiences both empowers and disempowers me at varying levels. Importantly these factors not only give me my identity as an individual but also give shape to my reading of texts both intentionally and unintentionally.
Moreover, my social location also includes the womanist perspective which as elaborated in Chapter 1, represents my ideological standpoint and give an assertion to my voice as an African (Motswana) woman.\(^{27}\) Worth noting is that the choice of the womanist approach is based on my interest in reading the text for advocacy and praxis of especially non-White and in particular, Black/Africa women. This is an interest born out of my social location; a hunger instigated by my personal journey and struggles. Therefore, the womanist approach defines my subjectivity and affirms my voice as a Black, African (Motswana) woman. It affirms my social location. This in turn, will permeate, inevitably so, all my investigation and research on Prov. 31:10-31, whether directly or subtly.

Importantly, my womanist reading of Prov. 31:10-31 will concentrate more on discovering the ideological aspect of the text that specifically places one gender (male) at an advantage over the other (female). This as we have seen in the discussion above, is a result of my own experiences. My social location has indicated that patriarchy plays a key role in the predicament faced especially by Batswana women. This includes such things as the rampant passion killings in the country and other forms of homicides suffered by the women. Therefore, while the womanist theory brings into the interpretive exercise the interplay of racism, classism e.tc., my reading will focus on finding a message that subverts patriarchy. This for me is the initial step to addressing other forms of oppression suffered by women, in particular women of my context.

\(^{27}\) For a detailed discussion on my methodology of this study, refer back to chapter 1, pp. 27-50 above.
2.2. A Translation of Prov. 31:10-31

The second preliminary issue is my translation of the text. The exercise is a fitting and necessary one as it will orient the reader to an understanding of the meaning of words and phrases and how I have used them throughout this study. It is important to note here that my translation is heavily influenced (in addition to the complex factors of my social location) by the particularly womanist lenses through which I read the text and which represents my overall social location. Therefore preference will be given to those meanings and meaning effects that are relevant for the purposes of this study as embedded within its said ideological perspective. Worth mentioning too, is that, my justification of word translations and meanings is heavily reliant on their uses elsewhere in the Hebrew bible which is the general context of Prov. 31:10-31. The translation is also based on the specific usage of the words in the context of Prov. 31:10-31. I also primarily focus on meaning nuances that are relevant to the questions behind the inquiry.28

The translation is as follows:

אשת חכמה היא נמצאת עם נשים מדות גדולות.

10. A ‘woman’29 of courage30 who can find?

28 For the main questions of inquiry for this study, refer back to Chapter 1, pp. 4-5.
29 אשת is the initial word in this aleph line. In the Hebrew the word means ‘woman’ or ‘wife’ and there is no distinction e.g. Gen. 34:8; 1 Sam. 30:5 (wife); Gen. 2:23; Esther 2:3 (woman); Bruce K. Waltke, The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31 (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 2005), p. 510 footnote 58; While in this case (Prov. 31:10-31) the female figure is a ‘wife’ (vv. 11, 23, 28), the translation of אשת as ‘woman’ is preferred because it is more inclusive of all females and less stereotypical while wife is restrictive to only a woman who is married and also represents a patriarchal stereotyping of the female other. In my reading, the woman at the center of Prov. 31:10-31 is not a stereotype/archetype/prototype defined by the patriarchal perception of femaleness/femininity. She is a woman in her own right whose identity is separate from that of her husband.
For her value is far more than corals.

11. The heart of her ‘lord’ trusts in her and he lacks no spoil.

12. She does him good and not evil, all the days of her life.

13. She seeks wool and flax and joyfully works with her palms

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30 The Hebrew term חַיִל often denotes ‘military courage and prowess’ (1 Sam. 31:12, 2:4; 1 Chron. 10:12; 2 Chron. 26:11; Ps. 18:40). In all these examples and others, the term is used with men as its subjects and it is a military/war/battle field term. It is only in three instances in the entire Hebrew bible that חַיִל has a female subject cf. Prov. 12:4; 31:10 and Ruth 3:11. See the discussions by: Yoder, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ p 432; Robert Alter, The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), p. 332. Alter notes that חַיִל is a martial term transferred to civic life. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 517), citing Erika Moore (‘The Domestic Warrior,’ [an unpublished paper submitted for OT 813, Proverbs, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1994], p 18) adds that the valorous wife is a heroic figure used by God for His people just as the judges and kings did good for God’s people by their martial exploits.

31 בָּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַעְלָּהּ וְשָּלָּל לֹא יֶׁחְסָּר ‘trust’ (Deut. 28:52; 2 Kings 18:20) is the initial word in this beth line.

32 בַעְל ‘her lord/master’ (Josh. 24:11; Judg. 6:31; Gen. 37:19). בַעְל can also mean ‘owner/possessor (Ex. 21:34). In this case the term is used for the notion of ‘husband’ (Gen. 20:3; Ex. 21:3). However as noted rightly by Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 510), outside of Proverbs בַעְל ‘man’ is mostly used for the same notion but in Proverbs בַעְל is used and always in relation to חַיִל (Prov. 12:4; 31:11, 23 and 28).

33 גְמָּלַתְהוּ טוֹב וְלֹא־רָּע כֹל יְמֵי חַיֶּיה ‘plunder/booty/spoil’ taken in war (2 Kings 3:23; 1 Sam. 30:20; 2 Sam. 8:12), Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 510) maintains that גְמָּלַתְהוּ occurs 75 times in the Old Testament and always refers to ‘booty/plunder/spoil and that the LXX, Targum and the Vulgate accept the same sense of גְמָּלַתְהוּ here. Alter (The Wisdom Book, p. 332) asserts likewise that the usual meaning of גְמָּלַתְהוּ is ‘booty’ and that the choice of this word might be an indication of the martial connotation of חַיִל in the previous line. Similarly Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 1065) also asserts that גְמָּלַתְהוּ ‘booty’ (v. 11), which is often toned down in modern translations, maintains its military connotations in Greek skylon. It reinforces the nuance of חַיִל in v. 10. It is important to note the use of גְמָּלַתְהוּ in Prov. 1:13, in the parent’s description of the street gang (‘the sinners’) who lie in wait to ambush the innocent for ‘spoil’. Readers are warned against that spoil and encouraged instead to desire this ‘spoil’ of the woman of courage. This may be argued to form some inclusio to the book.

34 ‘to render/do (good/evil to someone) cf. Gen. 50:15, is the initial word in this gimel line

35 ‘Inquire about’ or ‘seek, is the initial word in the dalah line.

14. She is like merchant ships; she brings in food from afar.

15. And she arises still in the night and gives prey to her house and a portion to her servant girl.

16. She considers a field and buys it; that the literal sense of the whole phrase is 'she performs with will/desire/delight with her palms.

37 לְהָּּיְתָּה כָּאֳנִיֹות סֹוחֵר מִמֶׁרְחָּק תָּבִיא לַחְמ - 'to be' or to 'become' is the initial word in this hey line.

38 רֵאֶשׁ which is a qal participle meaning 'going around', e.g. Gen. 42:34; Ps. 38:10 and Jer. 14:18 may also be translated as 'merchant' e.g. Gen. 23: 16; 1 Kings 10:28. In the latter sense the participle expresses the sense of going about in business/simply 'to trade'. I am convinced that both meanings are relevant here with the latter being weighty given v. 14b.

39 סֹוחֵר 'ships' e.g. 2 Chr. 8:18.

40 וַתָּקָּם בְעֹוד לַיְלָּה וַתִתֵן טֶׁרֶׁף לְבֵיתָּהּ וְחֹק לְנַעֲרֹתֶׁיהָּ - 'and she arises' is the first word in this waw/vav line. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 510) explains that the initial waw-consecutive subordinates v. 15 to v. 14.

41 נְטַע כָּרֶׁם - 'prey' e.g. Num. 23:24; Ezek. 17:9, 19:3; Gen. 49:9; Job 4:11; Ps. 104:21 and Amos 3:4. This is contrary to Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 894) who translates נְטַע as 'food' and yet maintains that in eighteen of its twenty two occurrences it means 'prey' or figuratively, 'robbed' or 'plundered' goods.

42 לְּבֵיתָּהּ - 'to her house' made of preposition ל ‘to’ and noun לֳבָּּטִים which is common masculine singular construct with a third person feminine singular suffix to indicate 'her house' as opposed to the common לֹבָּּט .

43 כָּרֶׁם - 'portion' e.g. Prov. 30:8; 'limit' cf. Job 14:5. It can also mean 'work' or 'imposed task' e.g. Ex. 5:14. I have adopted 'portion' here because it can refer to both a 'portion of food' as part of the prey she gives to the rest of the household, which fits the parallelism. It can also mean that she assigns some 'portion of work' to her servant girls which also fits within the context of v15. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 511) notes that some scholars translate כָּרֶּם as 'quota of work' and others as 'quota of food'. I think 'portion' is representative of both.

44 לֶבֶנְתָּ - 'portion' e.g. Prov. 30:8; 'limit' cf. Job 14:5. It can also mean 'work' or 'imposed task' e.g. Ex. 5:14. I have adopted 'portion' here because it can refer to both a 'portion of food' as part of the prey she gives to the rest of the household, which fits the parallelism. It can also mean that she assigns some 'portion of work' to her servant girls which also fits within the context of v15. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 511) notes that some scholars translate כָּרֶּם as 'quota of work' and others as 'quota of food'. I think 'portion' is representative of both.

45 לְנַעֲרֹתֶׁיהָּ - 'girl/maiden' as in a marriageable girl (a female youth who is still a virgin) e.g. 1 Kings 1:2; Judg. 21:12. Likewise Aitken (Proverbs, p. 156) translates the term here as 'maidsens'. However, I think Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 511) chooses a more relevant meaning for our context 'servant girls'. This meaning is used elsewhere in the Hebrew bible e.g. Gen. 24:61; as well as in Amos 2:7 where it expresses the idea of someone of low, humble status and hence a servant.

46 כָּרֶּם - 'to consider' is the initial word in this zayin line (from the root כָּרֶּם 'to consider/ devise'), e.g. Prov. 30:32.

47 Hebrew לְּבֵיתָּ - 'to take', e.g. Gen.12:5; Ex. 17:5. Depending on the context this term may also express other nuances e.g. 'to buy' as I would suggest in this case (Prov. 31:16). This is based on the general context here e.g.
from the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard.

17. She girds her loins in strength, and strengthens her arms

18. She perceives that her gain is good; her lamp will not be quenched in the night

19. She stretches out her hands to the spindle-whorl, and ‘her palms grasp the whirl of the spindle

consider the parallel line (v. 16b) which indicates that she plants a vineyard from the fruit of her palms and hence, her earnings.

48 ‘she girds’ is the initial word in this heh line (from the root הָגְרָּה ‘to gird’) which means to make ready for activity; for war, journey or other activity (cf. 1Kings 20:11; 2Kings 3:21; Ps. 45:4). Tzvi Novick, (‘She Binds Her Arms: Rereading Proverbs 31:17’ in Journal for Biblical Literature, Vol. 128/1 [2009], pp. 107-113), notes that it is not altogether clear what concrete action, if any, is involved in strengthening one’s arms but that most translators take it as a metaphor for entering upon one’s task eagerly or vigorously.

49 ‘loins/hips’ which is the strong musculature which connects the upper and lower part of the body; the lumbar region e.g. Gen. 37:34; Exod. 28: 42; Ezek. 47:4.

50 ‘strength/might/power’ e.g. Judg. 5:21, 9:51; said of God in Micah 5:3. Benjamin J. Segal (‘The Liberated Woman of Valor,’ p. 51) maintains that the Hebrew term יַחֲדָה used here always bears the implication of firmness, strength and might and hence ‘strength’ is used in practically all commentaries and translations of this verse.

51 ‘to strengthen’ e.g. Deut. 3:28; Isa. 44:14.

52 ‘arm’ e.g. Num. 6:16; a metaphor for an activity of power (or violence) cf. Job 22:8; military forces e.g. Ezek. 30:22. Szlos (‘A Portrait of Power, p. 102), notes that יַחְדָּה is a part of the body that frequently indicates physical power in labor and in battle.

53 ‘she perceives’ is the initial word in this tet line (from the root מָתְנֶיהָּ which literally means ‘to taste’) as in tasting food e.g. 1 Sam. 14:24; 2 Sam. 19:36. It also means ‘to discover by experience cf. Ps. 34:9. The latter meaning is adopted here. Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 895), translates מָתְנֶיהָּ as ‘she realizes’ and comments that ‘she is not a dull-minded workhorse, she can savor her achievements’. This is a fitting translation as well.

54 ‘to send’ cf. Ezek. 17:7, 31:4; Ps. 74:7; or to stretch out esp. one’s hand cf. Gen. 3:22; Prov. 31:20 or let free/loose cf. Gen. 31:42.

55 ‘a distaff.’
20. Her palm she spreads out to the poor and her hands she stretches out to the needy.

21. She will have no fear of snow for her house, because all of her house is in scarlet clothing.

22. Coverings, she makes for herself, linen and red-purple garment

23. Her lord is known in the gates, in his seat with the elders of the land.

24. Linen garment she makes and sells and a belt she gives to the traders

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56 כַּפֹּת, ‘her palm’ is the initial word in this kap line (from קָפָה, 'palm’), cf. Lev. 14:15; Ps. 139:5.
57 לָצַמְר, 'to spread out’ cf. Ex. 40:19; 1 Kings 6:27. This denotes the sense of opening one’s palm so that they can give out whatever they have in their hand.
58 כַּפֹּת, ‘crimson/scarlet’ e.g. Gen. 38:28; Ex. 25:4, Josh. 2:1. Fox (Proverbs 10-3, p. 896) says that like ‘purple’ in v. 22, ‘scarlet’ was an expensive cloth worn by the rich.
59 כַּפֹּת, ‘coverlet/covering’ is the initial term in this mem line.
60 כַּפֹּת, ‘linen’ e.g. Gen. 41:42
61 כַּפֹּת, ‘red-purple’ e.g. Ex. 25:4; Num. 4:13.
62 כַּפֹּת, ‘garment’ e.g. Gen. 49:11.
63 כַּפֹּת, ‘is known’ from the root יָדַע, ‘to know’ e.g. Ps. 140:13; Job 42:2; Deut. 8:3, is word initial in this nun line. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 512) translates לָצַמְר as ‘respected.’
64 כַּפֹּת, ‘linen garment’ e.g. Jud. 14:12; Isaiah 3:23 is the initial word in this samekh line.
65 כַּפֹּת, ‘Canaanite’ e.g. Gen. 12:6 but also means a ‘trader/merchant/tradesman’ e.g. Zech. 14:21. Alter (The Wisdom Books, p. 333), explains that ‘Canaanite’ is a gentilic term that is also the designation of a profession because of the prominence of Canaanites, perhaps assimilated to Phoenicians, as traders; Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 896) likewise maintains that ‘Canaanite’ is synonymous with Phoenicians, the great maritime traders of the Mediterranean basin and hence the term came to mean ‘trader’.
25. Strength\(^{66}\) and honor\(^{67}\) are her clothing
and she laughs at the coming day

26. Her mouth\(^{68}\) she opens in wisdom\(^{69}\)
and the law of kindness\(^{70}\) is on her tongue

27. She watches\(^{71}\) the ways of her house
and does not eat bread of sluggishness

28. Her sons\(^{72}\) arise\(^{73}\) and call her blessed
and her lord praises her.

29. Many\(^{74}\) daughters\(^{75}\) have done courage\(^{76}\)
but you ascend above all of them.

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\(^{66}\) נ ‘strength/might/power’ (see footnote 26 above).

\(^{67}\) הד ‘honor/dignity’ e.g. Lev. 23:40; Ps., 8:6, 96:6 (God’s glory), 21:6 (honor of a kin).

\(^{68}\) פ ‘her mouth’ (from מ ‘mouth’) is the initial word in this peh line.

\(^{69}\) הב ‘wisdom’ e.g. 1 kings 7:14; 2 Sam. 20:22.

\(^{70}\) ח ‘kindness’ e.g. Gen. 24:12; Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10.

\(^{71}\) הנ ‘she watches’ from נת ‘to watch’ e.g. Gen. 39:49; 2 Kings 9:17, is the initial word in this sadeh line. Albert Wolters (‘Sopiyya (Proverbs 31:27) as a Hymnic Participle and Play on ‘Sophia’ in Journal of Biblical literature, Vol. 104/4D [1985], pp. 577-587) notes the double anomaly of this word both from a syntactical and morphological point of view. He concludes that הנ is here a participial form of the term נת ‘to watch’ and that it is a hymnic participle. He also concludes that the choice of the form of this hymnic participle could be a play on Sophia which is the Greek word for ‘wisdom’ which could lead to the view that the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 represents wisdom in action.

\(^{72}\) נ ‘her sons’ fromận ‘son/male child’ e.g. Gen. 5:4, 37:3.

\(^{73}\) הם ‘they arise’ from ע ‘to arise/rise up’ e.g. Hosea 10:14; Job 22:28, is the initial word in this qoph line.

\(^{74}\) ע ‘many’ is the initial word in this resh line.


\(^{76}\) י ‘courage’ recurs e.g. footnote 7 above.
30. Favor\textsuperscript{77} is deception\textsuperscript{78} and beauty\textsuperscript{79} is breath\textsuperscript{80};
a woman who fears Yahweh she shall be praised

חנירה מקדמת נביאה וillez היא בשלום ושלום.

31. Give\textsuperscript{81} to her from the fruit of her hands
and let her deeds praise her in the gates.

2.3. Date of Composition of Prov. 31:10-31

Finally, the third preliminary issue is the dating of Prov. 31:10-31. While the question of the
dating of Proverbs including Prov. 31:10-31 is a difficult one to pin down, a few observations
are in order. It is important to note that as part of the preliminary issues to the entire study,
having some knowledge of the estimated date of our text will assist the reader to understand
the boundaries within which this particular study and investigation is taking place in relation
to the Hebrew bible as a whole, as well as in relation to the book of Proverbs. Therefore the
next discussion will focus on the difficult question of trying to establish the date of the text.

The book of Proverbs belongs to the genre of the Hebrew Bible classified as Wisdom
literature /the writings together with the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and a few Psalms.\textsuperscript{82} Two

\begin{relation}
\textsuperscript{77} חניר = favour e.g. Gen. 39:21; Ex. 3:21.
\textsuperscript{78} רעה = falsehood/deception/lie e.g. Ex. 23:7; 2 Sam. 8:15 is the initial word in this shin line.
\textsuperscript{79} יפה = beauty e.g. Isaiah 3:24; Ps. 50:2; Ezek. 31:8.
\textsuperscript{80} נש = ‘breath’ (in the sense of ‘transitory’) e.g. Isa. 57:13.
\textsuperscript{81} לנה = ‘give’ which is the initial word in this taw line is the imperative of לנה ‘to give’ e.g. Gen. 3:6; Ex. 5:18; Prov. 31:24. This translation differs with Albert Wolters (‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 449), who argues that the imperative with which the last verse begins should be read as meaning to ‘celebrate in song’ and not ‘to give’.
\end{relation}
other volumes are found in the Apocrypha, the book of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon.\textsuperscript{83} Dating these materials, like any other biblical text, is an uphill task that has attracted debates and controversies throughout the history of biblical scholarship. Yoder notes correctly that internal evidence for dating the book of Proverbs is frustratingly sparse.\textsuperscript{84} On a similar note Charles Carter observes that archaeological records that could possibly assist in reconstructing some aspects of the exilic or postexilic period of Israel’s life are sparse and inconclusive.\textsuperscript{85} The difficulties however do not diminish the need for any attempts to establish the date of the text.

Aitken maintains that some headings in the book of Proverbs suggest that king Solomon (mid-tenth century B.C.E) was the author, e.g. Prov. 1:1, yet other headings within the same book suggest that it comes from many hands and that it was a long time in the making.\textsuperscript{86} Katherine J. Dell contends that no wisdom literature in its final form in the canon (and this is including the book of Proverbs) can be dated before the exile.\textsuperscript{87} Consequently the date of composition of Proverbs is hard to pin down. This is especially made difficult by the many


\textsuperscript{84}Yoder, \textit{Wisdom as a Woman of Substance}, pp. 15-16.


\textsuperscript{86} Aitken (\textit{Proverbs}, pp. 1-2) maintains that the book of Proverbs is a collection of collections that were probably composed separately over time. Katherine J. Dell, (\textit{The Book of Proverbs in Its Social and Theological Context} [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], p. 4) similarly notes that the attribution of the book of Proverbs to Solomon is not the only one in the book; there are attributions to Hezekiah (25:1), to Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1). Harold H. Washington (\textit{Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of the Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs} [Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994], p. 112) too observes correctly that the book of Proverbs itself attributes its contents to different sources including Solomon, men of Hezekiah etc. He concludes that the superscriptions as well as the differences in form and content among the sections have led to the recognition of sub-collections among the proverbs that may have originated independently. Thus the evidence of a complex history vexes any attempt to generalize the dating of the book. Yoder (\textit{Wisdom as a Woman}, p. 16) on a similar slant, argues that the superscriptions and internal variations suggest that the book is comprised of sections that were woven together over time: 1:1-9:18; 10:1-22:16; 22:17-24:22; 24:23-34; 25:1-29: 27; 30:1-33; and 31:1-9; 10-31. See also Whybray, \textit{The Composition of the Book of Proverbs} (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) p. 168.

\textsuperscript{87} Dell, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p 4.
different threads to it which point to as many different contexts and spokespersons and hence different dates for the different sections.

Given the difficulties and the controversies in dating the book of Proverbs as a whole, one would not expect the dating of Prov. 31:10-31 to be any less challenging. Scholars and commentators have provided differing suggestions regarding its date which range from pre-monarchical times to the Hellenistic second century BCE. However many scholars agree that the text of Prov. 31:10-31 is post-exilic. For instance, Yoder maintains that Prov. 31:10-31 as well as Prov. 1-9 were composed during the post-exilic period and in particular in the Persian period. Likewise, Washington classifies Prov. 31:10-31 under the post-exilic collection of the proverbs. Camp, sharing similar sentiments, contends that virtually all commentators date the compilation of the book of Proverbs, as a whole, in the postexilic period. Bernard Lang equally maintains that Prov. 31:10-31 may represent an appendix, added to the older work not before the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. I will therefore, settle

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88 Aitken (Proverbs, p. 2) asserts correctly that the collection, namely the book of Proverbs, is at home in the pithy proverbs of common folk, the moral and religious instructions of parents, the sagacious advice of the elders and the political acumen of royal counselors. Alter (The Wisdom Books, p. 183) maintains that the book of Proverbs is not merely an anthology but an anthology of anthologies. Segal (‘The Liberated Woman,’ p. 50) also adds that the book as a whole is a brilliant weave of the secular and the sacred. Fontaine (‘Proverbs’ p. 153) also points out that the book of Proverbs is not a unified work and its content is wide ranging.

89 Dell, The Book of Proverbs, p. 4.


92 Clifford (Proverbs, p. 4) comments that the majority of scholars believe that the bulk of the sayings of Proverbs are preexilic or exilic and that most of the instructions and speeches (chaps. 1-9) as well as the final editing are postexilic.

93 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, pp. 16-38.


95 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 233.

for the postexilic, Persian period as the likely date for Prov. 31:10-31.

Of the preeminent scholars who have written on Prov. 31:10-31, one is particularly worth attention. This scholar is Yoder. She dedicated an invaluable project to the study of Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31. Yoder explores at some length some of the usually sidelined issues regarding particularly Prov. 31:10-31 including its date of composition. She ascribes Prov. 31:10-31 to the Postexilic Persian period and substantiates her stance on linguistic evidence. Yoder insists that an indication that a text might belong to a late period is the use of vocabulary that may be attested exclusively or predominantly in exilic or postexilic biblical and extrabiblical texts. Yoder also argues her stance on the bases of foreign influence, particularly, Aramaisms. She concludes by examining the orthography of Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31 to determine its consistency with her other linguistic findings. She contends that, although the orthography of the MT is neither consistent nor uniform, there is a general consensus among scholars that there has been a gradual addition of the *matres lectionis*, or vowel letters, to the original orthography in order to facilitate reading. While the use of external *matres* was common by the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, the use of internal *matres* was limited to the exilic and postexilic periods.

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98 Yoder provides an extensive exploration in her efforts to give linguistic evidence in support of Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31’s postexilic/Persian period dating in which she gives examples of words and phrases both from the said texts and from other texts throughout the HB. I will not attempt here to provide a reproduction of her findings but will rather give a brief synopsis of her arguments.
99 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, p. 20.
100 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, pp. 24-32.
101 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, pp. 35-38.
102 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, p. 35.
103 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, p. 35.
Yoder’s work is no doubt invaluable and informative, particularly her contribution to the issue of dating of Prov. 31:10-31 as discussed above. Nevertheless as contended by Clifford, dating of Proverbs based on linguistic evidence, editing devices and themes do not provide assured results.¹⁰⁴ For instance, Clifford notes that two phases of the language are generally distinguished, namely: pre-exilic Hebrew, i.e. pre-sixth century B.C.E which ceased to be used after the Babylonian exile; and late Biblical Hebrew which was to some extent an imitation of the pre-exilic language.¹⁰⁵ However the difficulty lies in determining where the Hebrew of Proverbs falls within the two classifications given the inevitable natural overlaps resulting from the dynamism of language itself.¹⁰⁶ Clifford further observes that Late Biblical Hebrew is often imitative of earlier Hebrew and that the archaic features of aphorisms are readily modernized by copyists.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, while Proverbs contain Aramaisms, such are present sporadically in pre-exilic texts.¹⁰⁸

In a nutshell, linguistic evidence cannot be an exact means to the dating of Prov. 31:10-31 as otherwise propounded by Yoder. However, it may not be dismissed completely provided there are enough linguistic examples from the text in question. Yoder seems to gather her linguistic evidence from many other texts of the Hebrew bible but hardly from Prov. 31:10-31. This is what I find problematic. Yet what seems reasonable to me is to acknowledge that while we cannot date Prov. 31:10-31 precisely and with all certainty on linguistic grounds, we however should appreciate that such are important pieces to the overall ‘puzzle’.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴See Clifford, Proverbs, p. 4.
¹⁰⁵Clifford (Proverbs, p. 4) citing A Saenz-Badillos (A History of the Hebrew Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) maintains that much of the research was done in prose and not with poetry while Proverbs is exclusively poetry.
¹⁰⁶Clifford, Proverbs, p. 4.
¹⁰⁷Clifford, Proverbs, p. 4.
¹⁰⁸Clifford, Proverbs, p. 4.
¹⁰⁹I call the dating of Prov. 31:10-31 (like the dating of all biblical material), a puzzle. Putting a puzzle together
Consequently, while acknowledging the challenges in determining the exact date of especially Prov. 31:10-31, I will adopt the post-exilic context of the Persian period suggested by Yoder and others. My choice is heavily reliant on the strong support in favour of the period by many scholars as discussed above. I will be analysing Prov. 31:10-31 within that social and cultural milieu. We will now summarize our preliminary issues.

2.4. Summary of the Preliminary Issues

The discussion of preliminary issues has highlighted three things: my social location, my translation and dating of our text. For the limited purposes of this study certain insights are worth pondering and these include the following:

a) Knowledge of the fact that I, the present researcher, carrying out an investigation of Prov. 31:10-31, am a product of my social location. My social location in turn, plays a vital role in determining the kinds of issues I tend to focus on while reading the text, and will play a vital role in the interpretation that will emerge. This is all embedded within the womanist theory which, whether stated directly or not, provides the overall flavour of the interpretation of Prov. 31:10-31.

[Involves a tedious process of piecing together, carefully, many different often, tiny pieces, until a clearly defined picture/structure is achieved. Analogously, endeavors to date the composition/editing/redaction of particularly biblical materials involves piecing together numerous often, scanty pieces of information.]

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b) The translation of Prov. 31:10-31 provided for the purposes of this study. Words, phrases and their meanings have been established. This is intended to orientate the readers so that they can understand how I have understood and will be using the words and phrases in my analysis.

c) The presumed date of writing/redaction/composition of Prov. 31:10-31 was sometime after the Babylonian exile and during the time when Israel was under Persian rule. Therefore Prov. 31:10-31 will be taken as a postexilic Persian period text and will be studied against such background.

The above factors are important for orientating the reader to an informed understanding of the general study of Prov. 31:10-31 from a womanist socio-rhetorical reading. All the other chapters that follow will in some ways and to varying degrees feed from this chapter. Ultimately the issues discussed in the chapter will permeate the rest of the research and give it direction. It is crucial to explain here that the womanist theory in particular, will become more explicit in some areas or even in some chapters of the thesis than in others. This will depend on the nature of issues discussed in the different parts of the thesis. I feel it will be unnecessary to state at all times that ideas or conclusions are drawn based on particular aspects of my social location and or the womanist theory as that will be tautological.
Chapter 3: Inner Texture Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31

‘Every reading has a Subtext’

We have already defined the meaning of inner texture in chapter one. In my analysis of the inner texture of Prov. 31:10-31, I will take a holistic view at the internal fabric of the text that seeks to explore: a) its overall literary structure and b) the rhetorical techniques of repetition/parallelism including the inclusios, transities, and chiasms.

As a starting point, it is important to note that the text of Prov. 31:10-31 is a widely known acrostic. It is arranged in such a way that each of the verses begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Importantly, some scholars hold that because of its acrostic form, Prov. 31:10-31 displays a jagged and disjointed structure. For instance, McKane maintains that the poet jumps from one point to another without caring about what has gone before and hence the poem has a haphazard structure. Still others believe that the text achieves an identifiable and incredible picture of a particular woman or even as further asserted by McKane, it gives a cumulative impression. However what is important for my purpose here is to explore the literary as well as the rhetorical nature of our text. That is, I shall in what follows investigate how some scholars have divided the text hence giving us its literary structure and how the poet/sage has employed the use of language to achieve communication about the subject of Prov. 31:10-31, namely, הָוָה מַגְּדִלָה, hence its rhetorical structure.

1 Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 291.
3 McKane, Proverbs, p. 665. Likewise Crook ‘(The Marriageable Maiden’, p. 139) blames the acrostic form of Prov. 31:10-31 for what she also believes is a haphazard structure.
4 McKane, Proverbs, p. 665. See also Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 464.
3.1. Literary Structure Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31

There is lack of agreement among scholars concerning the literary structure of Prov. 31:10-31 evidenced by a wide variety of divisions suggested by the different scholars. The central dilemma is whether it is possible to pin down Prov. 31:10-31 to a particular literary structure or not. As already noted, scholars are divided on this issue with some suggesting that the structure of our text seems disjointed and somewhat haphazard\(^5\) while others tend to see some intentional structure in the poem.\(^6\)

Yoder has made an important observation in this regard. She writes:

There is no apparent thematic order...Rather the poem reads much like an impressionistic painting. Viewed up close, the individual brushstrokes seem scattered and haphazard, but from a step or two away, dots and splatters merge to become the cumulative image of a woman.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 542. Toy holds that there is no order to the structure of this poem. McKane (*Proverbs*, pp. 665-666) similarly argues that the only unifying character of Prov. 31:10-31 is its acrostic format and that because of adhering to the acrostic format the author pays no attention to what has gone before or what will come after. This, according to McKane, has resulted in the jagged nature of the poem. Whybray, (*The Book of Proverbs*, p. 18) maintains that because of the necessity of observing the formal structure and sequence of the acrostic the poem of Prov. 31:10-31 has resulted in a lack of thematic sequence.


\(^7\) Yoder, *The Woman of Substance*, pp. 427-428.
McCreesh’s observation is also worth noting. He maintains likewise that despite an initial appearance of a jagged nature and arrangement, the poem (Prov. 31:10-31), when closely studied, manifests some order. He holds correctly that through word repetition and chiasmus, (which will be discussed under the rhetorical analysis later in this chapter) that involve the development/contrast of a theme and emphasis, there is clear organization and division of the poem.

For the purpose of this study, I will explore the contributions made by some of the scholars who argue for some meticulous structure of Prov. 31:10-31. The exercise will lay a foundation for my own structural outline of the poem.

Wolters, in particular, has made a significant contribution to the study of Prov. 31:10-31. Based on his form-critical analysis he has concluded that the poem belongs to Israel’s heroic poetry and in particular is a heroic hymn, characterized by the hero’s mighty deeds, especially his military exploits. Following on Gunkel, Wolters insists that a hymn is generally divided into three parts, namely, the introduction, body and conclusion. Accordingly, he has outlined the structure of Prov. 31:10-31 as follows:

1. Introduction (10-12)

2. The Deeds of the Woman (13-27)

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8 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 36.
9 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 36.
3. Call to praise the Woman (28-31)\textsuperscript{12}

It is notable that Wolters’s structure is inextricably linked to his perception of Prov. 31:10-31 as a hymn. While he has interestingly argued that form-critical distinctions are not hard and fast,\textsuperscript{13} his structure is conversely tied to that of a hymn. One would not dispute Wolters’s significant contribution to this otherwise sidelined feature of our text, in terms of its heroic emphasis. However, his structure does not do justice to the poem. Due to his preoccupation with the genre/form analysis of the poem, Wolters ultimately disregards the rather complex interlocking arrangement of the poem. He necessarily ensures that his structure conforms to that of the presumed genre, namely, a hymn. This is not to say that Wolters’ diagnosis of Prov. 31:10-31 as a hymn is not worthwhile but rather that in my opinion the structure of our text is much more complex than he assumes. When viewed from other angles, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Prov. 31:10-31 will prove to be more than just a simple structured hymn.

Yet another scholar who has contributed to the structure analysis of our text is Duanne Garrett.\textsuperscript{14} He argues for a chiastic structure which he outlines as follows:

\begin{itemize}
\item[A:] High value of a good wife (10)
\item[B:] Husband benefited by wife (11-12)
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{12} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 449.
\textsuperscript{13} Wolters, ‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31,’ p. 448. Wolters has noted that features of one genre do not necessarily exclude those of another.
C: Wife works hard (13-19)

D: Wife gives to poor (20)

E: No fear of snow (21a)

F: Children clothed in scarlet (21b)

G: Coverings for bed, wife wears linen (22)

H: Public respect for her husband (23)

G: Sells Garments and sashes (24)

F: Wife clothes in dignity (25a)

E: No fear of future (25b)

D: Wife speaks wisdom (26)

C: Wife works hard (27)

B: Husband and children praise her (28-29)

A: High value of a good wife (30-31)\textsuperscript{15}

Garrett has noted that in the centre of our text is the supreme benefit that the woman brings to her husband, namely, honour (v. 23).\textsuperscript{16} Accordingly Garrett argues that the husband, as illustrated primarily in v. 23, is at the apex of the arrangement.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore the pivotal theme

\textsuperscript{15} Garrett, \textit{The New American Commentary}, p. 248.

\textsuperscript{16} Garrett, \textit{The New American Commentary}, p. 248.

\textsuperscript{17} Garrett, \textit{The New American Commentary}, p. 248.
achieved by the supposed chiastic structure renders the husband of the Woman of Courage to be the centre around which everything revolves.

Garrett’s above chiastic structure of Prov. 31:10-31 appears rather artificial and forced. There is no doubt that there is some limited use of chiasm within the poem, particularly observable in vv. 19 and 20 (and this will be demonstrated later in this chapter). However it is an exaggeration to claim (like Garret does) that there is a consistent chiastic structure that can be used as a defining factor for the entire poem.

Garrett’s structure seems too broad and general so that it misses out on the important details of the poem that are necessary for understanding its central theme(s). Consider the following examples extracted from his structure:

**Example 1**

A Woman of Courage who can find? (10a)
For her value is far more than corals (10b)

**Vis-a-Vis**

Favour is deception and beauty is nothing; (30a)
a woman who fears Yahweh she shall be praised (30b)

Give to her from the fruit of her hands (31a)
and let her deeds praise her at the gates (31b)

In the above example, one can see some logical connection between the verses which is however so subtle that it cannot be claimed to represent a chiastic structure. For instance, in v. 10b it is indisputable that there is direct reference to the ‘high value of the woman’ but to claim that v. 10a together with 10b give a mirror-reflection of v. 30a and b as well as 31a and b, is unconvincing.

There is no doubt that vv. 30 and 31 generally refer to the same subject as v. 10 but in different ways. Verse 30 makes implicit reference to the woman’s fear of Yahweh in a way that echoes the general motto of the book of Proverbs\(^\text{18}\) without any obvious reference to the value of the woman (v. 10b). The verse (v. 30) however, is thematically linked to the subsequent one (v. 31) in terms of the theme of ‘praise’ as observable in the Hebrew verb לֹּה ‘to praise’ appearing in both verses.

To sum up the first example, Garret suggests that v. 10 is a reflection of vv. 30 and 31 in that:

a) they are all about the Woman of Courage b) because the woman is of high value (v. 10a) she must necessarily be a woman who has the fear of Yahweh (v. 30a) which will result in her being praised (vv. 30b and 31b). Nevertheless, while it might be logical to make such conclusions, the proposed chiasm between the verses is vague.

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Example 2

The heart of her lord/husband trusts in her (11a)
and he lacks no spoil (11b)

She does him good and not evil (12a)
all the days of her life (12b)

Vis-a-Vis

Her sons arise and call her blessed (28a)
her lord; and he praises her (28b)

Many daughters have done courage (29a)
but you ascend above all of them (29b)

In example 2 above, Garrett puts together two different themes and claims they are chiastic. The themes are what he calls ‘husband benefited by wife’ (vv. 11 and 12) chiastic with ‘husband and children praise her (vv. 28 and 29).\(^{19}\) What is observable here is that Garrett uses the term chiasm rather loosely. He suggests two different themes and yet insists in his structure that they are chiastic reflections of each other. The example represents a different kind of correspondence/relationship between the presumed chiastic verses. The relationship is, rather, logical and inferable by implication only. It can perhaps be explained as a correspondence of cause and effect. That is, because the woman has done well for her lord

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(vv. 11-12) it follows that she receives appreciation in the form of praise from both her sons and her lord (vv. 28-29). There is no chiasm between the themes.

Still in example 2, theme 1 (vv. 11 and 12, husband benefitted by wife) directly belongs together with v. 23 which Garrett terms ‘public respect for her husband’ and, which he places at the centre of the chiastic structure. The public respect of the husband is as well one of the benefits he gains from the Woman of Courage, who is his wife. Consequently, the very husband pays tribute to his wife for her benefits to him. He joins in the praise of her in vv. 28 and 29. Yet to claim that that there is chiastic reflection between the verses (11, 12 vis-a-vis 28, 29) and not linking vv. 11, 12 with 23 that are closely linked, is to lose the sense and meaning of chiasm.

Grouping together very general thematic items as indicated in the above examples, shows a failure to appreciate the internal fabric of the poem. Garrett’s chiastic structure, as illustrated in the above examples, is problematic. Chiasm involves closely related items in terms of the lexical and thematic parallels that should however be reflected in the reverse order, and hence it is like a mirror-like reflection. Therefore to link items that may be parallel in so far as one is a result of the other in meaning/ by implication, as in Garrett’s aforementioned examples, is to misconstrue the idea of chiasm.

21 Waltke, ‘The Role,’ p. 29. Waltke maintains correctly that the valiant wife’s (as he calls her) accomplishments empower her ‘respected’ husband to take a seat among the elders who among other things adjudicated legal disputes in the city gates. Alter, (The Wisdom Books, p. 334) shares similar sentiments with Waltke regarding the husband of the Woman of Courage’s position at the city gates by asserting that the affluence that this woman has made possible, enables her husband to hold his head up among the elders at the city gates. The significance of these two arguments (Waltke’s and Alter’s) is that the husband’s prestigious place at the gates (v. 23) cannot be dissociated from his wife’s achievements especially given the assertions of vv. 11 and 12.
22 A detailed definition of chiasm will be provided under rhetorical structure analysis later in this chapter.
Waltke maintains that in addition to being an acrostic, Prov. 31:10-31 (eulogy to the valiant wife, as he calls it) is logically arranged. Therefore he has provided what he claims to be a logical broad thematic division of the poem which he outlines as follows:

i) Introduction: her value asserted (10-12)
   a) In general, inferred by her scarcity (10)
   b) To her husband, relational (11) and financial (12) vv. 11-12

ii) Body: her activities itemized (13-27)
   a) Her economic base: her cottage industry (13-18)
   b) The janus (19)
   c) The achievements (20-27)

iii) Conclusion: the praise she receives for her industry (28-31)
   a) By her sons and her husband (28-29)
   b) By all in the gate (30-31)

Waltke argues further that a study of the acrostic’s syntax reveals its thematic unity which is reinforced by poetic artistry. He insists that the introduction and the conclusion (as outlined above) logically progress from the woman’s blessing of her husband to his praise of her. The itemization of the woman’s activity proceeds logically from her income based on her skill in weaving and is expanded through trading to her accomplishments as a result of that.

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activity. 

According to Waltke, v. 27 is joined with v. 26 by the initial participle making them one sentence.

Waltke’s structure is quite broad and it does not take into account the interlocking points and transitions that intersect throughout the poem. For instance, Waltke does not acknowledge that in v. 23 the poet reverts to the Woman of Courage’s benefit to her husband, a theme that came earlier in vv. 11 and 12; also in v. 26 the poet introduces a different theme into the context, namely wisdom. The theme echoes Woman Wisdom in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs, and this thematically matches v. 10b that equally relates the woman with Woman Wisdom. Therefore any analysis that generalises the arrangement of ideas and themes in Prov. 31:10-31 in order to come up with some neatly ordered structure will miss out on some of the important themes otherwise necessary for interpreting and understanding the subject of the poem.

Murphy has provided a more extensive structure of Prov. 31:10-31. He has given the following outline:

i) Introduction; rhetorical question (10a)

ii) Description of her value to her husband (10b-12)

iii) Description of her activities (13-22)

iv) Description of her effect upon her husband (23)

v) Description of her activities (24-27)

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28 The relationship between Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 of this study.
vi) Praise of the woman from her family (28-29)

vii) Wisdom saying which is applied to her (30)

viii) A command of the poet that she be duly recognized (31)

Murphy’s structure appears plausible in that it is more descriptive than prescriptive in nature. In other words, one can see that Murphy is trying to state the arrangement of the contents of the poem as they appear to the eye. He is not trying to pin down the poem’s ‘loose and free style’ to some strict order like the rest of the scholars considered in the preceding discussions.

In what follows, I will demonstrate the literary structure of Prov. 31:10-31 by way of describing the arrangement of the verses. My analysis will differ slightly from Murphy’s in that it seeks to take into account the specific and yet complex webs observable in the way keywords and themes appear to be interlocking and intersecting at different points in the poem.

What suffices immediately is that the structure of this poem revolves around לֹֽאַיִה, the Woman of Courage contrary to those who argue for the importance of her husband. The woman is introduced immediately as a valuable asset that is very hard to get (v. 10) and yet precious to strive for (v. 10b). Through multiple interlocking phases there is further description of her value to her husband (vv. 11, 12 and 23), her multifaceted activities and

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30 For instance, see Garret’s chiastic structure discussed earlier in this chapter.

31 Particularly v. 10b echoes Woman Wisdom who grazes the earlier chapters of Proverbs (1-9), and therefore making an inclusion with the rest of the book. No wonder scholars have argued convincingly that Prov. 31:10-31 and Prov. 1-9 form a bracketing around the entire collection of Proverbs. Refer to Camp (*Wisdom and the Feminine*, p. 187).
value to others beyond her household (vv. 13-22, 24, 27), allusion to her thoughtfulness (v. 18) and declaration of her wisdom and kindness (v. 26), the praise she receives from those around her (v. 28-29), an allusion to her fear of Yahweh (v. 30) and a cry/ call to give to the woman what is deservedly hers.

Thus the structure can be outlined as follows:
Introduction
Title: rhetorical question (v. 10a)
[Forms an inclusio with v. 29 through the repetition of חַיִל]

Transition
An assertion of her high value (v. 10b)
[Echoes the description of Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9]

Body
i) A priceless assert to her lord (vv. 11-12) [culminates in v. 23]
ii) An itemization of her heroic deeds for the entire household (vv. 13, 14-16, 19) [summed up in v. 27]
iii) Reference to her physical strength (v. 17) [culminates in v. 25]
iv) Reference to her thoughtfulness (v. 18) [intersects with v. 26]
v) Her philanthropic deeds (v. 20) [forms chiasm with v. 19]
vi) Her confidence for her household against future possible adversities (v. 21) [interconnects with vv. 13-19]
vii) Her taking care of her personal needs (v. 22)
viii) Her lord is known ...in the הָרִיָּה ‘gates’ ...(v. 23)
ix) Her trading business (v. 24) [intersects with vv. 13, 14]
x) Strength and honour are her clothing (v. 25)
xii) Assertion of her wisdom and kindness (v. 26)

Transition
From all her deeds to the theme of praise she receives (v. 28)

Conclusion
i) The praise she receives from her lord (v. 29)
ii) Allusion to her fear /reverence for Yahweh which will lead to her appraisal (v. 30) [intersects with the call to let her deeds praise her (v. 31)]
iii) The command to particularly those in the gates to praise the Woman of Courage and give her what is due to her and to let her deeds praise her (v. 31) [intersects with vv. 13-14, 16,19 as it recalls the woman’s handy work as well as v. 23 through the repetition of הָרִיָּה ‘the gates’ and with v. 30 through the repetition of the verb לְלָל ‘to praise’]
In the structure suggested above, I have used arrows to show the interconnected nature of our poem. The introduction is by way of the rhetorical question which names the subject, namely, the Woman of Courage (v. 10a). This also represents the title of the poem. Through the repetition of the term חַיִל this verse (v. 10a) forms an inclusio with v. 29. Verse 10b serves as a transition to the body of the poem and hence marks the beginning/ introduction to its body as well as marking the ending of the introduction of the poem. The declaration ‘for her value is more than corals’ (v. 10b) echoes the description of Woman Wisdom who is referred to in the same way. In this way the transition/transitio marks an intersection/seam between the introduction (v. 10a) and the rest of the body of the poem but also links the poem to the prologue of Prov. 1-9. It is at this stage in the poem that the poet hints at the high value of the woman which we then come to understand in the consecutive verses; in relation to her lord (vv. 11-12), and in relation to her entire household (vv. 13-19). Here we are also introduced to the different activities of the Woman of Courage from doing her lord/husband and family good to being an independent business woman who is also engaged in rigorous physical activities of weaving and spinning (vv. 13-19). There is also a hint at her thoughtfulness and careful planning in v. 18 which is then stated outright later in v. 26.

In v. 20, the poet introduces another of the woman’s beneficiaries other than her lord/husband and family, namely, the poor and the needy. This verse forms a chiastic parallel with v. 19

32 The inclusio will be explained and discussed further later in this chapter as part of the rhetorical structure analysis.
33 For detailed explanation see Robbins (Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 19) who expounds on the complexity surrounding what he calls the open-middle-closing texture of the inner texture, which is basically the outline of the structure of texts, much as what is being done here. He argues convincingly that the opening/introduction itself may have a beginning, middle and ending and that the body/middle as well as the ending/conclusion may too be sub-divided in the same way.
34 For instance, Prov. 3:15 says the same about Woman Wisdom.
35 The parallels between the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 and Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9 will be discussed further in the next chapter.
and this will be explained further under rhetorical structure later in this chapter. In v. 21, the sage makes reference to the woman’s confidence against future possible adversities. This is based on the fact that she has done everything possible to secure the future of her household through her deeds (vv. 13-19). The poet at this stage makes the audience aware of the psychological benefits that the woman gains from her heroic deeds (v. 21a). The audience is also made aware that the woman, through her deeds, has secured a future for her entire household in v. 21b (‘for all her house is clothed in scarlet’). Therefore v. 21 provides an intersection with the rest of the verses that came before it by making a thematic link between her provision for the family and the confidence she gains from such.

The mood of the poem suddenly changes in v. 22 when the sage tells of the Woman of Courage taking care of herself by specifically כה ‘coverings for herself’ (v. 22a). In v. 23 the mood swings back to the husband’s benefits, a theme introduced much earlier, in vv. 11 and 12. This time the poet summarises, by way of a climax, what highest benefit this man has gained from his wife’s deeds for him. Therefore the interlocking provided by the insertion of v. 23 at this stage in the poem serves to highlight that the prestigious reputation (v. 23) the man has gained cannot be dissociated from his wife’s earlier deeds (vv. 11 and 12).

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37 Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 221. Alden maintains that sitting at the gate does not mean this man loiters his days away. It more likely means that he is a judge or an esteemed and respected member of a judicial body that meets daily to determine questions of law. Alden further explains that the position at the gates is one of prestige, honour, public trust and grave responsibilities. See also the comment by Roland E. Murphy et.al., *New international Biblical Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999], p. 154).
38 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ pp. 27-28. In reference to v. 23, McCreesh observes that this verse immediately follows a description of the woman’s work in ‘fine linen and purple’ (v. 22). He therefore asks ‘is the husband’s position and the wife’s work again being associated, albeit by way of suggestion?’
In v. 24 the mood of the poem swings again, this time back to the woman’s trading business (vv. 13, 14). This connects with her earlier endeavours as one who seeks raw materials for weaving: דָּרְשָּה צֶּמֶּר וּפִשְתִים ‘she seeks wool and flax...’ (v. 13), and whose שַׂוְּאֵת צֶּמֶּר ‘like merchant ships’ (v. 14). Immediately there is a further swing to emphasis on the woman’s integrity as someone invested with עֹז וּהָדָּר ‘strength and honour’ (v. 25). The word עֹז ‘strength’ used here (v. 25) reminds the audience of its first usage עֹז in 17a, together with its synonym נָעַם ‘strengthen’ in v. 17b to underscore the woman’s physical prowess.\footnote{Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 100.}

In v. 26 an assertion of the woman’s possession of חכָּה ‘wisdom’ and חַיִל ‘kindness’ is introduced. However in v. 18 the woman’s wisdom was only hinted at in a subtle way through an allusion to her careful, thoughtful planning. This is reminiscent of Woman Wisdom who dominates chapters 1-9 of Proverbs and hence v. 26 reverts to v. 10b in its allusion to Woman Wisdom.\footnote{Still the similarities between the Woman of Courage and Woman Wisdom will be discussed in the next chapter.} In v. 28 we come to a transition from the woman being the doer to her becoming the recipient of others’ praise\footnote{McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 32.} of her which moves from her sons (v. 28a) to specifically her lord/husband’s assertion of her courage (v. 29a) which apparently surpasses all others (v. 29b). Through the use of the word חַיִל, v. 29 forms an inclusio with v. 10 giving the poem its overall agenda and hence alerting the audience to the central theme which is the woman’s courage (חַיִל).\footnote{The inclusio will be discussed further in the next chapter.} The emphasis is that she is the centre that holds everything else including the entire wellbeing of the ‘her household’ and especially her

\footnote{Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 100.}

\footnote{Still the similarities between the Woman of Courage and Woman Wisdom will be discussed in the next chapter.}

\footnote{McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 32.}

\footnote{The inclusio will be discussed further in the next chapter.}
husband’s entire being and reputation (vv. 11-12 and 23). That is, because of the woman’s courage her household, including her husband (v. 23), is a prosperous one.⁴³

In v. 30 the poet makes an allusion to ‘the woman’s fear of Yahweh’. Again there is an intersection with, and echoing of, the contents of the prologue to the book of Proverbs (chapters 1-9) in that ‘the fear of Yahweh’ represents the motto of the book of Proverbs, a theme recurrent in the first nine chapters of the book. This connects Prov. 31:10-31 to the larger collection of the Proverbs⁴⁴ and importantly forms a part of the appraisal scheme for the Woman of Courage.

The ending (v. 31), has significant overtones which reinforce the central theme of our poem (Prov. 31:10-31). It represents the last word of the poet/sage which, however, is a command issued particularly and importantly to those at the gates, calling for her due recognition, ‘Give to her of the fruits of her hands and let her works praise her at the gates’ (v. 31). The statement forms the apex of the poem because after all that the Woman of Courage has done (vv. 13-27) and after the praise she received from her sons and her lord/husband (vv. 28-29), the poet seals everything by way of an imperative, בָּרֵאשׁ ‘give’ (v. 31a), which is the initial word in this last line of the acrostic. This cautions specifically important men of the society to recognize and appreciate the woman and to acknowledge her works of courage, ‘let her deeds praise her’ (v. 31b). The deeds of courage of the woman put her on the same footing with those at the gates (v.23) a public space of recognition and prestige.

⁴³ See also the comment by van Leeuwen (‘Proverbs,’ p. 262).
⁴⁴ See for instance the discussion by Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p.11.
To sum up, v. 31 advances the poet/sage’s yearning to have the Woman of Courage take up an important place in society that would see her find a place within the otherwise male centred and controlled space as characteristic of the ‘gates’. In a way, the interlocking, transitional and intersecting themes and ideas throughout Prov. 31:10-31 are important in developing and advancing the poet’s argument in a memorable way through the acrostic format.

The literary structure analysis carried out in the preceding discussion leads us to further probe into the poem in order to find out how words in particular have been used to communicate the meaning of Prov. 31:10-31. That is, through the structure analysis we have seen that the poet/sage was not mindful of achieving some strictly ordered literary structure of the poem, except for its acrostic format.

The ideas and themes about the subject, namely, the Woman of Courage, seem to be interlocked so that they intersect at different points and places throughout the poem. The interlocking gives the poem its rich inner texture that calls for further investigation in order to dismantle the lexical threads that combine to give it meaning. Therefore the next section will focus on the rhetorical techniques and transitions in the text.

The exercise will make up the rhetorical analysis of Prov. 31:10-31, for through repetition/parallelism of whatever kind the poet aims to persuade the audience to see specific ideas/themes in the text. Furthermore, by paying attention to the persuasive strategy of

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repetition/parallelism, words and phrases gain special attention and hence show their relevance for interpreting אשת חיל as a Woman of Courage. This paves the way for further probing into the subject through the analysis of other textures that will follow in the next chapters of this study (which will include in this case; inter, social and cultural and ideological textures).

3.2. Rhetorical Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31

It is important to note that inner texture, as already indicated earlier in this chapter, brings together literary and rhetorical techniques into the interpretive process that aims to analyse words and their meanings in the text. Having explored the poem’s literary structure above, the next discussion will pay attention to its rhetorical structure.

I have already demonstrated that the literary structure of Prov. 31:10-31 is built on a complex web of interlocking keys words and themes. That is, although the structure of the poem may seem scattered but there are observable transitions and intersections throughout the poem. These hold it together and lead it to a significant climax. The climax of the poem is what this rhetorical analysis wishes to establish through the study of poetic rhetorical techniques that involve the use, play and interplay of words. The analyses will, in particular, pay attention to the rhetorical techniques common to Hebrew biblical poetry.

46 We must bear in mind that Prov. 31:10-31 is, above all, a poem. All the critics, commentators and scholars who have dealt with this text share the consensus that it belongs to Hebrew poetic literature. For instance Yoder, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ p. 428; Lang, ‘Women’s Work,’ p. 188. Lang maintains that it is a poetic portrait of the ‘capable wife’; Segal, (‘The Liberated Woman’, p. 49) similarly calls it the poem of the book of Proverbs; Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 51) also calls it the poem on ‘the valiant woman’.
Therefore, it is necessary to explore briefly what rhetorical techniques are common in biblical Hebrew poetry. This is meant to orient the reader to what is entailed in biblical poetry, a genre to which the poem of Prov. 31:10-31 belongs. The techniques will be discussed before exploring the poem in order to see which ones have been employed in its rhetorical structure and to what effect.

In his invaluable contribution, Robert Alter begins by asking the question, ‘what are the formal features that make up a poem in the Hebrew Bible?’ This is the question with which I will begin my analysis so that the answer to the question will provide the basis for my enquiry, namely, my rhetorical structure analysis of Prov. 31:10-31.

Following on James L. Kugel, Alter concludes that what clearly sets a text apart as poetry and not prose is its strictly observed principle of parallelism on which it is organized. John F. Hobbins citing Robert Lowth has noted that poetic texts in the Hebrew bible consist of verses formed of two or rarely three *stich* or members. Hobbins further describes parallelism across members of a verse as the chief hall mark of ancient Hebrew poetry, a point also held by Fox. This is also shared by David L. Petersen and Kent H. Richards who assert that anyone who interprets Hebrew poetry needs to understand parallelism.

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48 James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. vii and 2. Kugel contends that parallelism is a stylistic feature characteristic of what is generally considered the ‘poetry’ of the Bible. He further observes that the tendency of biblical style poetry is to establish through syntax, morphology and meaning, a feeling of correspondence between the two parts and that constitutes parallelism.
49 Alter, *The Art*, p. 3.
51 Hobbins, ‘Retaining and Transcending,’ p. 3; Fox (*Proverbs 10-31*, p. 493), too insists that parallelism is the
What then is parallelism? According to Adele Berlin, parallelism is a linguistic phenomenon that involves a relationship of correspondence between two things. Berlin adds that while the nature of such correspondence varies, in general, parallelism involves repetition or the substitution of things which are equivalent on one or more linguistic levels. That is, words, phrases even sounds may be parallel even if the lines to which they belong may not be parallel. Berlin concludes therefore that parallelism should not be restricted to linguistic equivalences that are in adjacent lines or sentences only, for such will be too narrow a view of parallelism.

From the preceding discussion, it will not be an exaggeration to conclude that parallelism is a form of repetition which however may occur on many different levels of language leading to different types of parallelism. For instance, Alter and Berlin both hold that there is semantic parallelism in which components of the first half of the line are being echoed in the second half, and syntactic parallelism in which, the word order in each of the half-lines exactly mirrors the other with each corresponding term in the same syntactic position. The same can be said of parallelism between the lines.

Alter further asserts that in many instances where semantic parallelism occurs, the characteristic movement of meaning is one of intensification, of focussing, specification, earmark of Hebrew poetry.

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54 Berlin, The Dynamics, p. 2.
55 Berlin, The Dynamics, p. 3.
56 Berlin, The Dynamics, p. 3.
concretization or even dramatization.\textsuperscript{58} He cautions that there is certainly some overlapping among these categories.\textsuperscript{59} Alter explicates with examples all of the various forms of semantic parallelism. I will briefly summarize his definitions as follows:

a) Intensification is where a more general term occurs in the first verset\textsuperscript{60} and a more accurate one occurs in the second.\textsuperscript{61} Intensification can also be achieved by the introduction of a simile or metaphor in the second verset that brings out the full force of meaning of an image occurring in the first verset.

b) Specification reflects movement from a general category to a particular instance. Importantly Alter points out that in some instances it may be hard to separate specification from intensification because as the general term is transformed into a specific instance the idea becomes more pointed and more forceful.

c) Focussing is where the first term is spatial/geographical and the second is a smaller spatial entity contained within the first.

d) Concretization/crystallization is whereby a verb/verbal phrase is paralleled by a nominal or adjectival phrase thereby concretizing the verbal process.

e) Dramatization is a form of specification, intensification and concretization where the greater specificity of the verbal activity in the second verset can be a way of dramatically realizing the initial verset. That is, ‘the heightened specificity becomes a hyperbolic stepping-up of the initial verb’.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} Alter, \textit{The Art}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{59} Alter, \textit{The Art}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{60} Alter, \textit{The Art}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{61} For elaborate examples see Alter, \textit{The Art}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{62} For detailed explanations and examples see Alter, \textit{The Art}, pp. 19-22. It is worth noting that Alter admits that in a very few exceptional cases one may find a reverse movement from specific to general or from figurative to literal.
It has been noted earlier in the discussion that parallelism occurs at differing levels in the language allowing for the existence of various types of parallelism, which includes the types listed by Alter above. However there are other forms of parallelism, namely *inclusio*, *transitio* and chiasm.

*Inclusio* is a form of parallelism\(^{63}\) in which the first and the last lines of a text contain the same words or phrases.\(^{64}\) It has also been described as ‘‘internal framing’, supporting a single text-unit at its extremities’.\(^{65}\)

*Transitio* is another form of parallelism in which there is a brief recollection of an earlier theme and a brief referral to an up-coming one.\(^{66}\) This simply expresses a form of transition from one theme to the next in which the previous theme is summarized and an upcoming one is hinted at.

Chiasm/Chiasmus\(^{67}\) is an important device commonly found in ancient Hebrew literature and oratory.\(^{68}\) In essence it means the arrangement of elements in the form of mirror-like reflection in which, as expressed by Frank W. Hardy, ‘the material moves in from both sides

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\(^{63}\) Berlin, *The Dynamics*, p. 3. Berlin maintains that *inclusio* is a form of parallelism and should be understood as such.

\(^{64}\) Berlin, *The Dynamics*, p. 3.


\(^{66}\) Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, p. 42.

\(^{67}\) Brad McCoy, ‘Chiasmus: An Important Structural Device Commonly Found in Biblical Literature’ in *CTS Journal Vol. 9* (2003), pp. 18-34, foot note 1. McCoy explains that while the terms ‘chiasm and chiasmus’ are interchangeable terms, there are other terms that may substitute for these especially common in modern technical literature. These may include the following terms; symmetrical alignment, envelope construction, epandos, concentrism, extended introversion, the chi-form, palistrophe, recursion, ring structure and introverted parallelism.

simultaneously toward a central point. It involves fundamentally two elements of inversion and balance which often times produces a third climatic centrality. That is, a chiastic structure establishes a central theme about which the other propositions of the literary unit are developed, whereby the author may compare, contrast, or complete each of the flanking elements in the chiastic structure.

The following discussion will focus on establishing the rhetorical nature of our text, the poem of Prov. 31:10-31. The exercise will pay special attention to the study of word repetitions and/parallelisms as building blocks for the structure. Robbins suggests that in order to be able to explore words, their meanings and meaning effects in a given text, words/phrases/items that occur more than once should be mapped out in charts. Doing so will introduce the interpreter to the overall nature of the poem which will lead to a closer and more focussed examination of its specific details. I will map out a chart with the repeated words/items listed according to the verses in which they have been used and in the order in which they appear in the poem. I will then single out each of the repeated items matching them with the ones with which they parallel and will describe the kind of parallelism present between them. Points of transitions and interlocking sections will also be discussed. As correctly noted by McCreesh, some of the repetitions mark or indicate changes or developments in meaning and hence themes effected by the parallelisms, transities, chiasms and inclusios will be elaborated on as they become apparent.

72We should bear in mind what was said earlier in the discussion, that parallelism is a form of repetition and hence my use of the terms interchangeably (at times) should not cause confusion.
73Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 8.
74Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 8.
75McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 31.
The repeated items will be outlined on the table below:

**The Repetitive Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31:10</td>
<td>אֵשֶׁת a woman</td>
<td>(of) courage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:11</td>
<td>בַעְל her lord</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:13</td>
<td>כַפֶּה her palms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:15</td>
<td>סָמ (and) she arises</td>
<td>לַיְלָה night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:16</td>
<td>כַפֶּה her palms</td>
<td>בֵית (to) her house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:17</td>
<td>ש strength</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:18</td>
<td>לַיְלָה night</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:19</td>
<td>כַפֶּה her palms</td>
<td>כַפֶּה her palms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:20</td>
<td>יָדֶּד (and) her hand</td>
<td>כַפֶּה her palm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:21</td>
<td>בֵיתָה her house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:22</td>
<td>עָשְׂתָה she makes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:23</td>
<td>בַעְל her lord</td>
<td>בְּשָׂעָרִים (in) gates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:24</td>
<td>עָשְׂתָה she makes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:25</td>
<td>ש strength</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:27</td>
<td>בֵיתָה her house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:28</td>
<td>נִמְשָׂא (and) they arise</td>
<td>בַעְל her lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:29</td>
<td>חָיִל courage</td>
<td>וַיְנַחֵל he praises her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:30</td>
<td>אִשָּׂה a woman</td>
<td>חָיִל (she shall be) praised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:31</td>
<td>יָדֶּד her hands</td>
<td>לַיְלָה (and) let praise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the following discussion, the repeated items in the repetitive chart above will be indicated within the verses or versets in which they have been used in the poem. They will be presented in both Hebrew and English so that the parallelism stands out and parallel verses/versets will be marked by two forward slashes (/\). It should be noted that in my analysis, parallel items are not only the ones that are morphologically identical but, includes those items that may be associated by meaning (semantic/thematic parallelism) or even antithetical associations. For convenience, parallel items will be underlined and explained in the discussion.

10a יָשָׂר 'a woman of בָּרָך 'courage' who can find? //

29a רַבֹות בָּנֹות 'many daughters' have done בָּרָך 'courage'//

30b אִשָּה 'a woman' (who) (has) fear of Yahweh she shall be praised

The term בָּרָך ‘courage’ has been repeated twice in the entire poem, namely in the opening v. 10a which also represents the introduction\textsuperscript{76} and in v. 29a which introduces the last section/conclusion of the poem. Therefore v. 10 and v. 29 form an inclusio. The two positions (of the introduction and the conclusion) in the literary structure in which the term בָּרָך has been repeated, are significant. By placing בָּרָך in the introduction (v. 10a) as well as in the conclusion (v. 29a), the repetition serves to underline the term and hence it will not be hyperbole to assume that the בָּרָך may indicate a central theme\textsuperscript{77} that the poet/sage wants to

\textsuperscript{76} Refer back to the literary structure outlined earlier in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{77} Wilbanks, ‘The Persuasion of Form,’ pp. 3-4, holds that v. 10 represents the theme of the poem. McCreesh (Wisdom as Wife, p. 32), also maintains that the repetition of the term בָּרָך emphasizes the incomparable worth of the woman celebrated in the poem. Van Leeuwen, ‘Proverbs,’ p. 260, likewise insists that the repetition of
emphasise. By placing this ‘defining word’ at important positions in the poem, the inclusive has served to denote a key word/theme so that everything included or ‘bracketed’ in between vv. 10 and 29 should be read to demonstrate the theme of חַיִל .

The noun אִשָּה ‘a woman’ has also been repeated twice, in vv. 10a and 30b, as shown above. This also forms an inclusive in that, as in the case of the term חַיִל , אִשָּה also appears in the introduction (v. 10) as well as in the conclusion (v. 30b) of the poem. Therefore there is further emphasis in the rhetoric of the poem in which the poet chooses the wording in such a way as to highlight the subject as well as the central theme, namely, אִשָּה /אֵשֶׁת חַיִל . That is, by including the term חַיִל and the noun אִשָּה /אֵשֶׁת חַיִל at the beginning and at the end of the poem, the poet wants to alert the audience and impress upon their memory these two words as the key terms that should be remembered.

On the other hand, there is semantic parallelism between the nouns אִשָּה ‘woman’ (vv. 10a and 30b) and בָּנָה ‘daughters’ (v. 29a). That is, in two instances the female others (v. 10a ‘the woman’ and v. 29a ‘daughters’) are described in terms of their חַיִל in that the woman in v.

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78 I call the term חַיִל a defining term, in this case in that it is the only description as well as the title of the woman at the centre of the poem. This woman is not named in terms of having a proper name assigned to her, but is only known as אִשָּה /אֵשֶׁת חַיִל ‘a woman of courage’. Therefore the term has a great significance in this regard.

79 Waltke, ‘The Role,’ p. 26. Waltke has expressed similar sentiments in his argument that the itemization of the deeds of the woman in the body of the poem defines specifically what is meant by חַיִל .

80 Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 534. Waltke maintains that the term בָּנָה ‘daughters’ is used as a synonym for ‘women’ only in poetry. Delitzsch (Proverbs, p. 340) suggests that ‘daughters’ is a more delicate, finer name for ‘women’. Whatever the case, I think that there is semantic parallelism here because both terms refer to female persons.
10a is of חַיִל while the many daughters in v. 29a do/have done חַיִל. Therefore the two are semantically and thematically juxtaposed. The parallelism serves to further emphasize the subject of the poem, namely לָיָּיִשׁ. That is, the woman’s courage (v. 10a) surpasses that done by ‘her’ like-others ‘the many daughters’ (v. 29a). Therefore the poet is skilfully using parallelism in which he contrasts and compares the woman with others in order to draw the audience’s attention to the woman’s unique courage.

The noun הַבַעְל ‘her lord/husband’ has been repeated three times in the poem in vv. 11a, 23a and 28b:

11a The heart of הַבַעְל her ‘lord’ trusts in her

23a ‘Her lord’ הַבַעְל is being known in the gates

28b ‘her lord’, הַבַעְל and he praises her

Wilbanks in his rhetorical analysis of the poem in which he divides it into five stanzas,\footnote{Wilbanks, ‘The Persuasion of Form,’ p. 2. Wilbanks divides Prov. 31:10-31 into five stanzas namely, Stanza 1: description of the activities of the Woman of Strength, as he calls her, (vv. 10-12); Stanza 2: description of the activities of the Woman of strength (vv. 13-20); Stanza 3: blessing for all associated with the woman of Strength (vv. 21-25); Stanza 4: description of the activities of the Woman of strength (vv. 26-27); Stanza 5: blessing of praise for the Woman of Strength (vv. 28-31).} contends that the repetition shows the husband to be present in the first, third and fifth stanzas.\footnote{Wilbanks, ‘The Persuasion of Form,’ p. 2.} Consequently the הַבַעְל ‘husband’ is mentioned at the beginning, middle and at the end of the poem and Wilbanks concludes that such an arrangement serves to underscore the
woman’s blessing to her husband. Wilbanks’s conclusion is feasible in so far as he acknowledges that the בַעֲלָּהּ in the poem is portrayed as a passive beneficiary of the woman’s deeds. However to insist like Wilbanks does, that the poem seeks to highlight the husband (בַעֲלָּהּ) in order to persuade young men to seek such a woman, is to do injustice to the poem and to contradict its rhetorical objective. The בַעֲלָּהּ appears minimally and basically does nothing when compared to the woman. Thus to think that the poem aims to highlight the בַעֲלָּהּ and not the other way round is a misconception.

On the contrary, I suggest that the repetition of בַעֲלָּהּ in the versets above (vv. 11a, 23a and 28b) seeks to highlight the Woman of Courage as opposed to her lord/husband, who is rather pushed to the fringes of the poem as the woman’s adjunct. There are important signifiers that it is the ‘woman’ and not the ‘man’ who is being elevated. The signifiers are:

a) He is referred to as ‘her’ lord (בַעֲלָּהּ). This may indicate that his existence and identity is rigidly associated with her. In as much as such reference may serve to subordinate the woman to the man, as his chattel, on the other hand it works to

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86 Even McCreesh (‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 27) whose reading and interpretation of the poem seems to display some bias toward the man and is supportive of the patriarchal status quo that seeks to stereotypically confine her to the wifely roles, admits that this man is passive while the woman is actively involved. Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 896) too indirectly admits the same. That is, even though he claims that this man is engaged in business and agriculture (a point which is unfounded), he nevertheless admits that the man’s reputation at the gates comes from the woman’s virtues and achievements that the poem details. The point is that, it is the woman’s achievements that are detailed in the text and not the man’s. Yoder (Wisdom as a Woman, p. 89) also shares the view. Therefore, v. 23 not only highlights the highest, and apex, of this man’s benefits from the woman but may also be read as an invalidation of his own work (if any) and perhaps his worth too. He is merely an adjunct of the woman, mentioned only to highlight her חַיִל. This makes sense given that it is the woman here who is being praised and not the man hence to claim like some scholars do (refer back to footnote 82 above) that the poem seeks to underline the husband is unreasonable.
subvert and sabotage that very meaning given that nowhere in the poem is she referred as ‘his’.

b) The versets above contain verbs that signify lack of any physical activity on the part of the הָּּבַעְל. He is denoted as one who בֵּשֵׁה ‘trusts’ (v. 11a), נַעֲנֶה ‘is known’ and הָּּנַעֲנֶה ‘and praises her’ (v. 28). Therefore the action verbs relating to this man cannot be compared with the ones that relate to his wife’s deeds itemized throughout the body of the poem. McCreesh summarizes this point when he asserts that ‘everyone is served, helped, ministered to by the wife; her own household (vv. 12, 15, 21, 23, 27) and even the poor and the needy (v. 20)...Nowhere does her husband contribute to any of this.’

c) Moreover, the repetition of הָּּבַעְל marks ‘the switch from noting the husband’s trust in his wife (v. 11) and his renown among his peers (v. 23), to his own praise of his wife at the end of the poem (v. 28).’

It is important to note that in my literary structure of the poem, the three places where the noun is used are as follows: at the beginning and middle of the body of the poem (vv. 11 and 23 respectively), and in the transition from the body to the conclusion of the poem (v. 28). 

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87 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 28. Szlos (‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 98) shares similar sentiments concerning the involvement of this woman in practical action. She maintains that ‘the preponderance of action verbs in the third person feminine singular form (with הָּּבַעְל as the subject) tell the reader that this woman is a doer, a productive person, one who labours physically during her waking hours’. Hurowitz (‘The Seventh Pillar,’ p. 212) also maintains correctly that the Woman of courage is the subject of all verbs except v11 where the husband is the subject, v. 28 where the children and the husband are the subject, v. 30 which makes a statement about women in general, and v. 31 which addresses the listeners. 

88 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 33.

89 This is contrary to Wilbanks (The Persuasion of Form, p. 3, citing Meinhold, ‘Die Spruche’, p. 522) who
The position signifies the man’s reliance on the woman and his subsidiary status in relation to her which culminates in his praise of her (vv. 28, 29).

In a way, therefore, the Woman of Courage is being portrayed in juxtaposition to her lord/husband. However the contrasting of the two is done in a skilfully subtle manner. For instance, v. 23 seemingly interrupts the poet’s flow of thought in that the mention of בַעְל in the middle of the itemization of the woman’s deeds seems awkward. However it is the rhetorical skill of the poet to indirectly highlight a contrast between the woman and her lord. That is, while the woman does everything and is actively involved as indicated in the ‘action verbs’ in the preceding verses (vv. 13-22) and in the later ones (vv. 24-27), in v. 23 her lord is referred to in passive terms as one who is ‘known’ when he sits ...at the gates. This statement (v. 23) serves to show that her lord’s prestigious position among the elders at the city gates derives from the deeds and achievements of the woman and that it actually pales in significance when compared to her great and multiple deeds.

13b. and joyfully works with כפֶיה ‘her palms’ //

16b. with the fruit of כפֶיה ‘her palms’ she plants a vineyard //

19a. She stretches’ out יָדֶיה ‘her hands’ to the spindle-whorl //

19b. וְכַפֶיה ‘and her palms’ grasp the whirl of the spindle //

asserts that the nouns אִשָּה (vv. 10 and 30), חַיִל (vv. 10 and 29), and בַעְל (vv. 11, 23 and 28) provide an ABC/C’B’A’ inclusio around the poem.


91 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p 896; Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p. 89.

92 McCreeesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 27.
20a. כף ‘her palm’ she spreads out to the poor //

20b. ידהו ‘and her hands’ שלא ‘she stretches’ out to the needy //

31a. Give to her from the fruit of ידה ‘her hands’

It is interesting to note the repetition of ידה ‘her hands’ and כף ‘her palms’ in the verses above. As Szlos has correctly observed, the body parts repeated here are those normally used to perform physical work, to exert one’s physical power.93 Furthermore, scholars have noted the chiastic pattern between verses 19 and 20 which puts special emphasis on the body parts repeated (כף and ידה).94 That is, the one who ‘works with כף, ‘her palms’ (v. 19) is also described as one whose ידה ‘palms’ opens out to the poor and the needy (v. 20).95 It may be concluded that her work/the work of her hands is a means through which she is able to demonstrate her humanitarian spirit. She works with her hands and the produce of her handy work is what she uses to reach out to those in need.

There is also a notable thematic relationship between vv. 13b and 31a:

13b. and joyfully works with כף ‘her palms’ //

31a. Give to her from the fruit of ידה ‘her hands’

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93 Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ pp. 100-101. Szlos argues that in the Hebrew bible, ידה ‘hand’ and כף ‘palm’ are body parts of power and physical labour and gives examples of Gen 5:29, 20:5; Prov. 12:14, 31:31. She further maintains that putting ones hand to a task becomes a metonym for physical work in the Hebrew bible.


95 Van Leeuwen, ‘Proverbs,’ p. 262.
As someone who works willingly or joyfully with her palms (v. 13b) the woman deserves to be rewarded for the work of her ‘hands’ (v. 31a). The palm being the inner part of the hand is the part that gets practically involved in physical work and it cannot do any work if separated from the hand so that hand and palm represent the same phenomenon in physical labour for one cannot do without the other. This is what Alter calls focusing. Therefore v. 13b and 31b form a thematic seam, which puts emphasis on the Woman of Courage’s physical prowess and practical engagement in which she is hands-on. Her deeds are chronicled specifically beginning from v. 13 onwards and in v. 31a they are called into remembrance as worthy of reward. The audience is reminded in v. 31 that the very ‘palms’ (v. 13) that have been busy throughout the poem, working on different things, have resulted in the ‘hands’ (v. 31) having to receive the ‘fruits’/proceeds (v. 31) of their labours.

15a. וַתָּקָּם ‘and she arises’ still in the לַיְלָּּה ‘night’ //

18b. her lamp will not be quenched בַּלַיְלָּּה ‘in the night’ //

28a. הָקָּמוּ בָּנֶּה ‘her sons arise’ and call her blessed

The repetition of וָּקָּם ‘to arise’ (vv. 15a and 28a) is significant. It marks important thematic developments in the poem in that the woman who arises וַתָּקָּם in order to give service to her household as indicated in the rest of v. 15 has her sons וָּקָּם ‘arise’ (v. 28a) in order to pay

their tribute to her as implied in ‘and (they) call her blessed’ (v. 28a). Therefore through the repetition of the term יָּנֶּה the poet has achieved thematic correspondence between the woman’s deeds for her household and the appreciation for such from members of the household as represented in בָּנֶּה ‘her sons’ (v. 28a). The repetition of יָּנֶּה in v. 28 is particularly important given the transitio represented by this verse which connects the works of the Woman of Courage listed throughout the body of the poem, with the poem’s concluding remarks that recalls those deeds (v. 31). It marks a significant intersection and seam that gives the poem its thematic unity and development. The woman’s deeds and the appraisal she has earned from those deeds are at the centre of the conclusion as a whole (vv. 29-31).

The term לַיְלָּה ‘night’ has been repeated twice in the poem as demonstrated above. It first appears in v.15a which describes the Woman of Courage as one rising at לַיְלָּה ‘night’ to work. In v.18b the theme is picked up and the woman is described as one whose lamp does not go out at לַיְלָּה ‘night’. Therefore through the repetition of the word לַיְלָּה there is thematic development that seeks to accentuate the woman’s untiring industriousness. She is portrayed as one whose resourcefulness is not governed by time but by set goals and the determination to achieve those goals. That is, the Woman of Courage’s activities are

98 Edgar Jones, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: Introduction and Commentary (Bloomsbury, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961), p. 251. In commenting on Prov. 31:28, Jones maintains that the action of rising up could represent a mark of respect (cf. Lev. 19:32). Therefore by rising up, the sons are showing respect and hence paying tribute to the woman. In repeating the same word, יָּנֶּה, to describe both the woman’s action and that of her sons, the poet has achieved thematic unity. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 533) sums up the idea by asserting that in v. 15, the woman rises to pursue her ceaseless industry for her household and in v. 28, they (her household) all rise up to give her public honour.
100 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 43.
101 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 43.
ceaseless, day and night. Therefore it is not surprising that her lamp burns through the night (v. 18).

17a. She girds her loins 'in strength'
17b. 'to strengthen' her arms
25a. 'Strength' and honour are her clothing

The repetition of the word אַמֵץ 'strength' in vv. 17a and 25a together with its synonym עֹז 'to strengthen' is worth our attention. Szlos contends that, together with חַיִל 'power' (as he translates it, repeated in vv. 10 and 29), these words for strength in vv. 17a and b, 25a are power words. She insists further that the words depict the woman as physically powerful. She is also economically and socially powerful because the text indicates that her physical labours result in commerce. In the same vein McCreesh has also concluded that the woman of חַיִל creates, builds up, strengthens, nurtures and protects and hence חַיִל connotes strength (the same as עֹז and אַמֵץ, ability, valour and wealth.

The repetition of עֹז in v. 25a is particularly important in that it relates the Woman of Courage’s physical labours with her dignity/honour as implied in the pairing of these terms.

102 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 43.
‘strength and honour’ in v. 25a. By the play of these two words, the poet is skilfully advancing the thickly embroidered nuances of חַיִל.

It is inevitable to conclude that the rest of the poem is rhetorically consistent and coherent so that the central theme of the woman’s חַיִל is artistically expressed. This is further enriched and supported by the use of other power connoted imagery (metaphors and similes) in the poem. For instance, the use of military and hunting imagery as well as other masculine/power words in addition to חַיִל ‘courage’ includes the following words:

- לָּל ‘Booty/plunder/spoil’ (v. 11b)
- טֶׁרֶף ‘Prey’ (v. 15b)
- מָּתְנֶׁיה ‘Her loins’ (v. 17a)
- זְרֹעֹותֶׁיה ‘Her arms’ (v. 17b)

The above listed words are figurative in some ways and these shall be discussed briefly. It is worth noting that in the HB, the noun שָלָּל ‘booty’ (v. 11b) occurs seventy-five times and always in reference to plunder, booty or spoil which is an explicit military image.

The description in v. 17a, ‘she girds her מָּתְנֶׁיה ‘loins’ is a masculine image that portrays the

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108 Refer back to the translation of the term discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.
109 Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 102. Van Leeuwen (‘Proverbs,’ p. 261) also adds that the term שָלָּל ‘booty’ suggests that the woman is like a warrior who brings home booty from her victories.
woman as preparing for heroic/difficult action, usually for warfare.\textsuperscript{110} The term טֶׁרֶף ‘prey’ is hunting terminology which depicts the Woman of Courage metaphorically like a lioness which hunts for its prey by night.\textsuperscript{111} Moreover, the noun לָּזְרֹעֹותֶׁיה ‘her arms’ (v.17b) bears military connotations,\textsuperscript{112} and when paralleled with ‘loins’ (v.17a) can ‘connote preparation for strenuous activity’.\textsuperscript{113} That is, arms are tools of aggression or war\textsuperscript{114} so that the use of this term in the context of the woman of courage is partly metaphorical serving to enhance and advance the meaning of the overall key word, חַיִל.

15b. and gives prey to לָּבֶית ‘her household’ //

21a. She will not fear from snow to לָּבֶית ‘her household’ //

21b. because all of לָּבֶית ‘her household’ is ‘clothed’ לָּשֶׂת in scarlet //

22a. ‘Coverings, עָּשְׂתָּה ‘she makes’ for herself //

22b. a garment of six purple //

24a. Linen garment, עָּשְׂתָּה ‘she makes’ and sells //

\textsuperscript{110} Waltke, ‘The Role,’ p. 25; Szlos (‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 102) adds that nowhere in the HB does the term פָּרְשָׂת ‘loins’ appear in reference to a woman. It is therefore another example of this woman being portrayed in terms usually reserved for men. In a way therefore the word לָּמְתַנֶּיה ‘her loins’ is figurative.

\textsuperscript{111} Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 524, ‘The Role,’ p. 25. Waltke correctly maintains that לָּמְתַנֶּיה represents the figure of a preying lioness and hence belongs to the preying imagery. He adds that this word should not be interpreted literally. Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 894) also explains that לָּמְתַנֶּיה means ‘prey’ or, figuratively, robbed or plundered goods. He adds that although in the context of Prov. 31:15 it is used in the extended sense of ‘food’, it still carries its predominant meaning of ‘prey’ and ‘plunder’ which gives it the overtones of aggression and pugnacity. It is as if to hint that the woman is something of a preying lioness in providing for her young. Therefore the use of לָּמְתַנֶּיה in v. 15 is metaphorical.

\textsuperscript{112} Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 102.

\textsuperscript{113} Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 894.

\textsuperscript{114} Szlos, ‘A portrait of Power,’ p.102.
24b. and belts/sashes she gives to the traders //

25a. Strength and honour are [לבוש] ‘her clothing’ //

27a. She watches the ways of [ביתָּה] ‘her household’

The repetition of [ביתָּה] ‘her house/hold’, four times, in vv. 15b, 21a and b and 27a serves to accentuate the deeds of the Woman of Courage for her household. She is portrayed as one who gives ‘prey’ to ‘her household’ (v. 15b), one who will not fear for ‘her household’ (v. 21a) because ‘her household’ is clothed in scarlet (v. 21b) and finally as one who watches the ways of her household (v. 27a). Therefore the parallelism in these verses is such that in v. 15b the poet introduces the specific ways in which the woman caters for the needs of ‘her household’. She provides them with the basic necessities of food and clothing (vv. 15, 21b).\(^{115}\) Her provision for the family’s entire needs is then summarized in v. 27 ‘she watches the ways of her household’. Consequently the woman is in charge of the household.

It is important to note the progression of thought highlighted through the parallelism in the verses listed above. The poet advances his message by way of the repetitions of words so that the first time ‘household’ is mentioned (v. 15b) we are made aware of her food provisions for them, the second time it is mentioned we are told of her confidence in the security of her household (v. 21a). In v. 21b the reason for the confidence is spelt out and hence we can safely conclude that the latter (v. 21b) intensifies and even dramatizes the message of the former (v. 21a) making the picture vivid in the minds of the audience.

\(^{115}\) McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 41.
Through the repetition of the word יָהּ בֵיתָּה ‘her household’ in the above parallelism (vv. 15b and 27b) forms an inclusio around vv. 21a and b, 22a and b, 24a and 25a. That is from the initial mentioning of ...’her household’ (v. 15a) to the last (v. 27a) all else in between (that is, vv. 21, 22, 24a and 25a) serves as specification and intensification of the pivotal message that portrays the Woman of Courage as a selfless breadwinner for her household. It is especially through the repetition of the word לְכָלָּה ‘clothing’ that the poet achieves the climax of his message that seeks to show the woman as one who is skilfully involved in textile production for the benefit of the entire family including herself. That is vv. 21b, 22a and b, as well as 24a outline the specific textile items she makes, from the raw materials mentioned earlier in vv. 13 and 19, namely, coverlets and clothing, garments and belts/sashes. As correctly asserted by Waltke, the connection is reinforced by the repetition of the verb עָּשְׂתָּה ‘she makes’ (vv. 22a and 24a).

23a. Her lord is being known בַשְעָּרִים ‘in the gates’//

31b. and let her deeds praise her בַשְעָּרִים ‘in the gates’

116 Waltke, ‘The Role’, p. 29. Waltke comments convincingly that the structure of this poem develops the woman as a selfless breadwinner for her family and an important contributor to society. He adds that with regard to her family she puts exquisite food on their table and clothes them with finery. With regards to the community she gives to the poor and provides merchandise for the merchants. Waltke further insists that above all, the woman empowers her husband who is respected in his own right to establish a righteous and just nation.

117 See Waltke, ‘The Role’, p. 29. Waltke gives a detailed discussion on the chiastic structure that he maintains exists between these verses (vv. 21a-25b, 25a-21b).

118 Waltke, ‘The Role’, p. 29.
The repetition of the term בַשְעָּרִים ‘in the gates’ in v. 23a and 31b is particularly interesting given the subject of the two versets in which it appears. In v. 23a, the הָּּבַעְל ‘her lord’ is the subject, while in v. 31b it is the Woman of Courage who is the subject. The poet, by repeating the word הבשְעָּרִים ‘in the gates’, in reference to both ‘her lord’ and ‘the woman’ herself, in the way in which he does, is subtly being sarcastic of her lord. After telling the audience that her lord is the one known/respected,119 in the gates (v. 23), he turns around and suggests that it is the woman who ‘must’120 be praised at the gates. In a way therefore, the poet challenges the order of things, as it were. The repetition of הבשְעָּרִים serves to further elevate the woman based on her works /the works of her hands, while at the same time it challenges the position of her lord at the gates. That is, contrary to scholars who argue that the central message of the poem is focused on her lord,121 the juxtaposition of the woman and her lord in relation to the gates significantly undermines her lord’s position at the place. Instead the poet subtly and yet violently pushes her lord out of the underserved place at the gates and advocates for the woman who has worked for it. The injustice that the woman has suffered because she has not been duly rewarded for her heroic deeds finally becomes spelt out in the vehemence of the radical mood of the poem in v. 31a and b. The idea is embedded artistically and skilfully within the poem’s rhetorical use of parallelism.

119 Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 530. Waltke argues that the Hebrew term נֹודָּע which means to be ‘known’/ probably ‘renowned’ (v. 23) means that the man is respected. He further contends that even though Job 29:7-17 does not use the verb, it nevertheless describes what it means to be known at the city gates.

120 I use the word ‘must’ based on the imperative at the beginning of v. 31a in which the addressees are compelled to do as told. That is ‘must’ is meant to reflect the same message as expressed by the imperative ונִת ‘give to her’(v. 31a) as well as the jussive form וִיהַלְלוּהָּ בַשְעָּרִים מַעֲשֶׂׂיה ‘and let her works praise her’...(31b).

121 See the chiastic structure of the poem by Garrett, The New American Commentary, p. 228. Garrett places the husband of the Woman of Courage at the Centre. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 530), likewise maintains that ‘to know’ from נֹודָּע ‘to be known’ (v. 23) means to know by personal contact and hence in this context it means that the other dignitaries are familiar with the man’s own judicious wisdom and so respect him. Such a conclusion seeks to elevate the man’s status as one who has earned himself the prestigious position at the gates. Waltke’s further argues that the woman’s own character and genius are a crown on her lord/husband’s head so that the one who matters to Waltke is the man while the woman is merely there to serve him.
28b. her lord; and he חלוועי ‘praises her’/\

30b. a woman (who) (has) fear of Yahweh חלאה ‘she shall be praised’/\

31b. and let her deeds חללו ‘praise her’ at the gates

The poet further employs repetition to sum up his ideas and to accentuate the central message of the poem. That is by repeating the word חל ‘praise’ throughout vv. 28, 30 and 31; the poet has eventually underscored his polemical message. That is, the initial use of the term is significant in that it marks the intersection/ transitio between the body of the poem and its conclusion.\(^\text{122}\) Therefore by first appearing in the transitio (v. 28) and then becoming the key word that dominates the conclusion (appearing three times in four versets – vv. 28b, 30b and 31b), חל makes a thematic and logical association between the deeds of the woman chronicled in the body of the poem with the praise at the end. That is, just as spelt out in v31b ‘let her works praise her....’ the appearance of חל in v. 28b marks a radical move by the poet who now blatantly addresses the perpetrators\(^\text{123}\) in an authoritative voice that gives a command (v. 31a and b).

\(^{122}\) See p. 96 above in which the literary structure of the poem is outlined indicating the breaking points and intersections in the poem.

\(^{123}\) Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 536. Waltke asserts the poet here addresses the responsible citizens at the gates. However Waltke does not explain what he means by the ‘responsible’ citizens and hence leaves his conclusion open to different interpretation or inferences. In this case Waltke might be suggesting that the addressees here are the ones responsible for the unfair treatment of the woman as implied in the jussive form ‘let her works..’ 31b. It might also imply that he is referring to the gate occupants as ‘responsible’ simply in reference to their leadership status. Nevertheless my conclusion is that the gate occupants / the elders of the land (זיקני-אר) are to blame for the unfairness which has seen the חלב (v. 23) known in the gates instead of the Woman of Courage whose works must be rewarded at the gates (v. 31).
3.3. Conclusion

An investigation into the literary and rhetorical structure of Prov. 31:10-31 has indicated that although seemingly jagged, the structure of this poem is artistically and skilfully embroidered. The poet has used different poetic skills in his rhetoric. The poetic devices, in addition to the acrostic format, include especially parallelism in its various forms, namely, *inclusios, transitios, chiasmus*. The poet has also employed other rhetorical strategies of intensification, dramatization as well as metaphorical imagery. These literary and rhetorical devices have been utilized by the poet to reveal in a vivid way what it means to be a woman of courage as entailed in the key term, namely יִלְיהוּדָה.

However, unlike scholars who argue for a neat arrangement of the poem of Prov. 31:10-31, this particular inner texture analysis has demonstrated that the literary structure of this poem is rather complex. Themes and ideas are embroidered in a way that they interlock and intersect at various points in the poem. It has been shown that the introduction is by way of the rhetorical question only (31:10a) while 10b forms a *transitio* that however links the introduction to the rest of the body of the poem. The body is itself made of webs of intertwined themes, *inclusios, transitios* and chiasmus elements that do not necessarily follow a neatly arranged structure.

For instance, in vv. 11 and 12 the husband of the Woman of Courage is shown to benefit from her courageous deeds of industry and bravery as embedded in the imagery of the word יִלְיוּדָה ‘plunder/booty’(v. 11). The value of this woman to her husband climaxes in v. 23 which
However comes after other themes regarding the woman’s provision for the entire household (vv. 13-19) and humanitarian endeavours (v. 20) that have been chronicled. In this way then one can see that the poet is not following some neatly consistent structure in which themes are arranged in an orderly fashion.

The analysis has revealed that words play an important role in the rhetoric of the poem. The repetitive chart mapped out has indicated some of the important themes that the poet seems to impress upon the audience/reader. These include the theme of לֹּם which forms an inclusio around the poem by appearing in the introduction (v. 10a) and recurring in the conclusion (v. 29a). The repetition of this word in v. 29 serves to remind the reader/audience of this theme so that everything covered within the bracketing (vv. 11-28) must be understood as a demonstration of the woman’s courage and what it entails.

While the poem is rich in action words,\(^{124}\) the chiastic structure between vv. 19 and 20 has also demonstrated that the Woman of Courage is one who works with her hands to make products for the benefit of her family and her community. The interlocking created by the repetition of the words כַפֶּה ‘palms’ and יָדֶה ‘hands’ (vv. 13b, 16b, 19 and 20, 31a) serves to highlight and accentuates the physical prowess of the Woman of Courage. Furthermore the parallelism between especially v13b ‘and joyfully works with כַפֶּה ‘her palms’ // Give to her from the fruit of יָדֶה ‘her hands’ (v. 31a) unifies the poem in a remarkable way that shows that the woman deserves appreciation (vv. 28 and 29) which will culminate in her securing a place at the city gates as implied in v31b ‘and let her deeds praise her at the gates.

\(^{124}\) This point has been correctly observed and noted by other scholars including, van Leeuven, ‘Proverbs,’ p. 260; Szlos, ‘A portrait of Power,’ p. 102.
It has also been demonstrated that the recurrent use of power invested words such as בְּרִית ‘strength’ (vv. 17a and 25a), בַּעֲדָם ‘strengthen’ (v. 17b), as well as military and hunting terminology including בֹּקֶל ‘arms’ (v. 17b), כּוֹרָה ‘courage’ (vv. 10a and 29a), בֹּקֶל ‘booty’ (v. 11b), בּוֹרֶה ‘prey’ (v. 15a) further accentuates the woman’s courageousness. She is someone who is shown to be proactive, industrious, selfless and brave.

The recurrent use of the noun בֵית ‘her house/hold’ (vv. 15 has been demonstrated to underscore the Woman of Courage as one who is in charge of the household. The household which is referred to as ‘hers’ throughout the poem is inclusive of her lord (vv. 11-12, 23), her sons (v. 28a) and her maid servants (v. 15b). She is the one in control of the household and this theme is significantly summarized in v. 27a which states that ‘she watches the ways of her house/hold.’ This is a fitting conclusion given that throughout the poem the woman is shown to provide for all the needs of her household. The provisions include food (v. 15), and clothing (v. 21b) coupled with an allusion to her securing a future for the household (v. 21a).

In sum, the literary and rhetorical analysis of Prov. 31:10-31 has demonstrated that the inner texture of this poem is heavily intertwined. The poet has demonstrated the freedom of thought with which he nevertheless skilfully crafted a thickly nuanced poem that at first glance may appear simple and jagged but that after careful analysis proves to be complex and yet meaningful. There is observable word play and parallelism/repetition of different
kinds that build into themes and hence, as correctly observes by Waltke, the poem’s thematic unity is reinforced by its poetic artistry.\textsuperscript{125}

Chapter 4: Intertexture Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31

‘Every Comparison has Boundaries’¹

My analysis of the inter texture will focus on aspects of oral-scribal intertexture as outlined by Robbins (recitation, recontextualization, reconfiguration, narrative amplification and thematic elaboration).² These aspects of intertexture will be explored always having in mind the research questions behind this study.³ The investigation will pay special attention to how language (i.e. words, phrases and their meanings) from Prov.1-9, 12:4 and the book of Ruth, has been reformulated in the context of Prov. 31:10-31. The reasons for my selection of the above mentioned texts (Prov. 1-9, 12:4 and Ruth) will be explained shortly.

It is, once again, important to note that my research is directly or indirectly guided by my own ideological background as a womanist, and one whose social location has been discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Because of my background I am inclined towards certain nuances of the text than others, both directly and indirectly.

4.1. Demarcating the Borders for Intertexture Analysis of Prov. 31:10-31

Due to the complexity of the wide spectrum of networks and webs of meanings and associations shared by texts, it is important to demarcate borders within which this study will examine the intertextual analysis of Prov. 31:10-31. Without established borders, intertextual

¹ Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 299.
² Refer to the discussion of these textures in chapter 1.
³ See chapter 1, pp. 4-5 for the research questions.
study can be an unending process. This is because every text we read, speak or write is constructed on the building blocks of previous texts. Similarly, Robbins acknowledges the complexity of intertexture when he asserts that ‘meanings themselves have their meanings by their relation to other meanings’.

Here aspects of the oral-scribal intertexture that are relevant to the womanist reading of Prov. 31:10-31 will be of utmost interest. Because of the womanist perspective that underlies this particular intertextual study, attention will be paid to those aspects of the intertexture that pertain to the construction and portrayal of the female others in the texts being compared. This will enable the examination of those aspects of the intertexture that are necessary for revealing the gender issues inherent in our text. Therefore the study cannot claim to be exhaustive. As mentioned above, the analysis will be limited to the interactive relationship between Prov. 31:10-31 and three other texts, namely the book of Ruth, Prov. 1-9 and Prov. 12:4.

The choice of the book of Ruth and Prov. 12:4 is based on the observation that these are the only instances in the Hebrew Bible, apart from Prov. 31:10-31, where the phrase אֹילָה הָזָהא נוֹמָלַח אֲנָแผน a ‘woman of courage’ has been used. Murphy equally remarks that Prov. 12:4 has no relation to the context of the rest of Prov.12. He contends that the importance of אֹילָה הָזָהא נוֹמָלַח is indicated

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4 Tull, ‘Rhetorical Criticism,’ pp. 164-165. Tull further explains that this interconnectedness of texts with others as well as with external phenomena is known as intertextuality. She further postulates that these connections can be as general and indirect as shared language, or may be as specific and direct as the footnoted quotation of one text in another. See also van Wolde ‘Intertextuality,’ pp. 427-429.
5 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 4.
7 Murphy, Proverbs, p. 89.
by the poem dedicated to her in Prov. 31:10-31 and also in Ruth 3:11. The two texts (Prov. 12:4 and Ruth) therefore, stand in close juxtaposition to Prov. 31:10-31. Thus an intertextual study that cuts its borders around these texts is justifiable.

On the other hand the choice of Prov. 1-9 as part of this intertextual analysis is based on the obvious closeness of this text to Prov. 31:10-31. As correctly maintained by Whybray, it can be asserted with some plausibility that the final section of the book of Proverbs (Prov. 31:10-31), corresponds to the first section (1-9). That is, Prov. 1-9 is remarkably preoccupied with a narrative about women and their speech, as is Prov. 31:10-31 which focuses on the portrayal of a woman.

In Prov. 1-9 the speech is about two directly opposing female figures, namely, Woman Wisdom and her ‘evil twin’ Woman Stranger. Thus portraits of women frame the entire collection of Proverbs. However in this section of the study, I will concentrate on the parallels between Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9 and the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31.

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8 Murphy, Proverbs, p. 89.
9 Whybray, Proverbs, p. 17.
10 Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse,’ p. 8. Camp (Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 187) likewise asserts that the preponderance of female imagery in Prov. 1-9 and Prov. 31 assumes great significance. She argues that this may not be coincidence but that the imagery should have crucial literary and theological claims to the material it surrounds. Therefore Prov. 1-9 stands in close juxtaposition with 31:10-31 in its subject matter so that an intertextual study of the two seems to be a worthwhile exercise.
11 McCready, Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 28.
12 Fontaine, ‘Proverbs,’ p. 154; Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p. 10.
13 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p. 11; Whybray, Proverbs, p. 17; Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 187. Clifford (Proverbs, p. 130) also emphasizes that אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל (the capable wife, as he translates this phrase) is the theme of the concluding poem of the entire book of Proverbs (31:10-31).
Many scholars have observed that the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 (i.e. the Woman of Courage), manifests many of the traits of wisdom and hence is similar in many ways to Lady/Woman Wisdom. Thus it is the seeming resemblance between the two women that has led us to ask how the speech about the Woman of Courage relates to that about Woman Wisdom. It is important to note that at this stage I will not look into the other woman, namely, the Strange Woman. While she bears striking similarities with Woman Wisdom, the Strange Woman is portrayed in negative terms while the Woman of Courage (like Woman Wisdom) is given a highly positive description. However in the next chapter Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman will be studied in conjunction for the purpose of establishing the socio-cultural context of the post-exilic /Persian period Israel with special interest in its portrayal of women.

It is outside the scope of this chapter to delve into detailed arguments concerning the issues of date. Nevertheless a brief look at this will provide a fitting starting point and context for the intertextual analysis. This is important given the assumption that scribal intertexture, which is the focus of this analysis, occurs between the given text and earlier or contemporaneous others. Therefore I will briefly discuss the dating of Prov. 1-9, 12:4 and Ruth. We have to bear in mind that Prov. 31:10-31 is assumed to be dated to the postexilic/Persian period.

4.2. A Note on the Dating of Prov. 12:4; Ruth and Prov. 1-9

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14 Hawkins, ‘The Wife of Noble Character,’ p. 18. Masenya (‘Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 61) in the same vein, asserts that we cannot ignore the close similarities between this poem (Prov. 31:10-31) and those dealing with Woman Wisdom in Prov. 1-9.
15 See Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, pp. 299-301. Even though Robbins does not state directly that intertexture occurs between the text and the already existing others (earlier or contemporary) this is implied in his explanation and discussion of the texture. For instance he asserts that a feature of intertexture is echo. This implies the resounding of what is already known.
16 Refer to the discussion on the dating of this text in chapter 2.
4.2.1. Dating Prov. 12:4

Prov. 12:4 is generally believed to belong to a collection of short sayings in Prov. 10-29. Scholars generally presuppose a pre-exilic dating for the collection. For instance, Daniel C. Snell contends that the current view is that Proverbs 10-22:16 is probably the oldest part of the book of Proverbs. However we may not completely rule out the possibility of later editions. For the working purposes of this study, I will assume that Prov. 12:4 may be dated to the Pre-exilic period as part of the wide-ranging collections within Prov. 10-29. My assumption is based on the general agreement among scholars on this issue.

4.2.2. Dating the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth is also dated by many to the pre-exilic era, although as is common for the biblical books, it is not without controversy. Kirsten Nielsen for example, postulates that

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17 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, pp. 504-505; Murphy, Proverbs, pp. xx-xxi.
19 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, pp. 504-505. Murphy (Proverbs, pp. xx-xxi) explains convincingly that since the book of Proverbs is a collection of collections it is difficult to date its materials with precision.
20 Jack M. Sasson, Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), p. 240. Regarding the difficulties and controversies that surround the dating of the book of Ruth, Sasson indicates that there is a wide range of opinion on this matter. He observes that some have proposed the early, middle or late Monarchic period. Yet others have defended positions that place Ruth in exilic or postexilic times. He adds that a few have insisted on dates as late as the fourth century B.C. Interestingly Sasson does not come to a conclusion on this matter despite his extensive work on the book of Ruth. Carolyn Pressler (Joshua, Judges and Ruth [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002], p. 262) holds that the book of Ruth may have been written about the same time as Joshua and Judges. She however notes interestingly that the dating of Ruth is very uncertain. Pressler further observes how the work of Frederic Bush (Ruth, Esther [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1996], pp. 18-30) suggests that Ruth was written just before, during or soon after the Babylonian exile. This shows the difficulty in pinning down the book’s dating to any period of time.
the book must be pre-exilic.\textsuperscript{21} In the same vein, Elizabeth C. Stanton argues for the pre-exilic era, a time somewhere at the beginning of the days when judges ruled Israel.\textsuperscript{22} Tull too makes an allusion to the pre-exilic dating of Ruth.\textsuperscript{23} Given the strong support among scholars regarding the pre-exilic dating of Ruth, I will assume that Ruth is more likely pre-exilic. This is merely for the working purposes of this chapter and will not make any claims to its precision.

4.2.3. Dating Prov. 1-9

Like the rest of biblical materials, the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs (Prov. 1-9) are difficult to pin down to a particular date, a point noted by Fox.\textsuperscript{24} However many scholars date them to the post-exilic era.\textsuperscript{25} Despite the dating of both Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31 in the post exilic era, Prov. 31:10-31 can still be read in the light of Prov. 1-9. This seems plausible given that one (Prov. 1-9) provides an introduction and the other (Prov. 31:10-31) a conclusion to the entire book of Proverbs.\textsuperscript{26} In this way Prov. 1-9 can be taken as contemporary with Prov. 31:10-31. Consequently, Prov. 31:10-31 may echo Prov. 1-9 and hence the aim is to quantify and qualify the similarities and differences.

\textsuperscript{24} Fox, \textit{Proverbs 1-9}, p. 49; Yoder, \textit{Wisdom as a Woman}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{25} Fox, \textit{Proverbs 1-9}, pp. 48-49. Fox maintains that although it is difficult to securely ascertain the dating of Prov. 1-9, it is however the latest stratum of the book. In his discussion he seemingly places this section of the book of Proverbs anywhere between the Persian/Post exilic and Hellenistic periods, but without denying a possibility of an earlier date. Yoder (\textit{Wisdom as a Woman}, pp. 15-18) admits that the dating of the book of Proverbs, like that of many other biblical texts, is an uphill task. However, she concludes that most presume that both Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31 were the last additions to the book sometime in the postexilic period. Camp (\textit{Wisdom and the Feminine}, p. 187) also maintains that Prov. 1-9 and 31 as a framework for the book of Proverbs was probably put together in the post exilic era. She further asserts that it is possible that older works were put to a new use in this context.
\textsuperscript{26} Camp, \textit{Wisdom and the Feminine}, p. 188.
4.3. Scribal Intertexture of Proverbs 31:10-31

The next step in this intertextual endeavour is to read Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of the three texts. This is called scribal intertexture.27 The analysis will be focused on this sub-texture of the intertexture and as hitherto explained, the historical and cultural intertextures will be discussed under socio-cultural texture which constitutes the next chapter. It is however important to note that some aspects of the historical, social, ideological and cultural textures may pervade this intertextual study. This is indicative of the point raised earlier that the multiple textures of a text are closely related and sometimes even intertwined.

This section of the chapter will be divided into three parts: a discussion of Prov. 31:10-31 in relation to Prov. 12:4; and a discussion of Prov. 31:10-31 in relation to Ruth; and a discussion of Prov. 31:10-31 in relation to Woman Wisdom (Prov.1-9). At the end a summary of insights from the intertextual reading will be provided.

4.3.1. Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of Prov. 12:4

There are two key terms that connect Prov. 12:4 with Prov. 31:10-31. These are the phrase אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל ‘a woman of courage’ and the noun לְיָדָיו ‘her lord’. However, it is important to

27 Refer back to the definition of scribal intertexture in chapter 1.
note that beyond the two key-terms mentioned above, 12:4 is also thematically linked to 31:10-31. This will be demonstrated shortly.

In Prov. 12:4, the author makes a single statement:

A woman of courage’ (אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל) is a crown to her lord (יהלוך) (Prov. 12:4a)

There is no further explanation of what this otherwise richly nuanced assertion means. Instead the reader is left to fill in the gaps. This has landed the text in an array of different interpretations.28 However it is later in Prov. 31:10-31 that we get to learn more about what is merely hinted at in Prov. 12:4.29 Consider the following:

A Woman of Courage’ (אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל) who can find? For her value is far more than corals. (31:10)

The heart of her lord (יהלוך) trusts in her and he lacks no spoil (31:11)

28 For instance, Clifford (Proverbs, p. 130) maintains, that, the ‘crown,’ may allude to the crowns worn by the bride and the groom during the wedding ceremony. He adds that the antithesis in the two cola is between not only a competent and foolish wife, but also between the public (‘crown’) and private spheres (rot in the bones’). Clifford concludes that an incompetent spouse causes anguish to the other. Alden (Proverbs, p. 99) understands this verse as meaning that behind every successful man there is a wife and vice versa. He insists that the woman who brings shame on her husband also brings about his downfall. Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 547) interprets the verse as meaning that it is not a wife’s beauty that reflects honor but her חַיִל strength of mind and character. He maintains that if one takes a wife who lacks this, he will suffer pain and shame to the core of his being.

29 McKane, Proverbs, p. 443. Commenting on Prov.12:4, McKane has observed correctly there is a detailed description of the אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל in Prov. 31:10-31. McCreesh (‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 40) likewise has noted that the saying in 12:4 seems to give a hint of what is to come in chapter 31 and provides in advance an apt image with what is to characterize the portrait given in the latter. Christensen (‘Ruth and the Worthy Woman,’ p. 4) too holds that Prov. 12:4 constitutes the primary text on which the content of Prov. 31:10-31 is built.
Her lord (חַיִל) is being known in the gates, in his seat with the elders of the land (31:23)

Her sons arise and call her blessed and her lord (חַיִל) praises her (31:28)

Many daughters have done courage (חַיִל) but you ascend above all of them (31:29).

Both the terms חַיִל ‘courage’ and חַיִל ‘her lord’ are used only once in Prov.12:4. In Prov. 31:10-31 ‘courage’ is repeated twice (Prov. 31:10 and 29),\(^{30}\) and ‘her lord’ recurs three times (Prov. 31:11, 23 and 28).\(^{31}\) Consequently, the repetition of these key words in the latter text is an indication of an expansion of the topics/themes introduced in the former.

Prov. 12:4b is not linked to Prov. 31:10-31 by the vocabulary/terminology as is 12:4a. Instead its linkage is in the subtle message contained in the antithesis of this half verse (12:4b). This is echoed in the second half verse of 31:12b, and hence the antitheses match each other in meaning as shown below:

But rottenness in his bones is her shame (Prov. 12: 4b)

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\(^{30}\) McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 32. McCreesh maintains that the repetition of חַיִל in Prov. 31 highlights the incomparable worth of the woman celebrated in the poem. See also the discussion in Chapter 3.

\(^{31}\) Refer back to chapter 3 of this study.
And (she does) not (do him) evil all the days of her life (Prov. 31:12b)32

Prov. 12:4b provides a fitting parallel with Prov. 31:12b which alludes to the antithesis. In both instances we are left with a stereotypical portrayal of women as either good or bad in relation to their male others. The antitheses play upon the patriarchal image of a good woman versus an evil/bad one so that in the presence of one is the shadow of another.33

Beyond the obvious parallels between Prov. 12:4 and Prov. 31:10-31 is the lurking patriarchal ideology that seeks to define women not only as possessions in the hands of men and for their selfish good but also as potential vicious enemies. This takes us back to the dichotomous image of woman in Prov. 1-9 where the good woman (Woman Wisdom) versus the strange/ evil woman (Woman Stranger).

What then are the topics/theme(s) foreshadowed by Prov. 12:4 and amplified by way of thematic elaboration in 31:10-31? I will propose that there are three themes: a) Female courage b) Woman as man’s belonging and for his service.34 c) Woman as either good/ bad. These are hinted at in Prov.12:4, deducible from the key terms as well as entailed in the antitheses of Prov. 12:4b and 31:12b.

32 The words in brackets are meant to complement the meaning of this half verse by way of compensating for the missing first half of the verse (31:12a).
33 This patriarchal ideology will be explored further in chapter six which focuses attention on the ideology of the text.
34 Murphy, Proverbs, p. 89. Murphy, commenting on Prov. 12:4 asserts convincingly that it advances the belief that a woman’s value is calculated in relationship to the male. Jon L. Berquist (Reclaiming Her Story: The Witnesses of Women in the Old Testament [St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1992], p. 133) expressing similar sentiments about the message of Prov. 12:4, asserts that it would be more accurate to say that a good wife is a wonderful thing for a man to have. He maintains that in wisdom thought, women are often possessions. In the tradition women’s virtue is never portrayed as positive in and of itself but only that a woman’s strength benefits her husband.
Prov. 31:10-31 thus tells us in explicit ways what the woman of courage does by itemizing all her deeds (vv. 13-27). In that way the meaning embedded in the phrase ‘a woman of courage’ becomes self-explanatory. Prov. 31:10-31 also specifically details what the woman does for her lord/husband (vv. 11-12, 23), thereby unfolding the message entailed in ‘a crown on his head’ as stated earlier in Prov. 12:4a. Ultimately Prov. 31:10-31 also presents a good woman as opposed to a bad/evil one. Her portrayal inclines more to the positive and hence she is ‘one who is a crown to her lord’ (v. 12:4a) and one who ‘does good to him’ (v. 31:12a). Consequently, her courageous, good dealings to her lord not only casts her own shadow as the ‘good’ one, but also that of her evil twin; one who is rottenness in her male other’s bone (12:4b) and does him evil (31:12b).

4.3.2. Reading Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of Ruth

An intertextual study of Prov. 31:10-31 (אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל) in the light of the book of Ruth reveals some striking similarities between the two women (Ruth and the Woman of Courage). At the same time substantial differences are also apparent. Therefore the analysis will pay attention to both the similarities and the differences between the two texts.

A word study that looks into the vocabulary shared by the two texts, including the main phrase, ‘a Woman of Courage’ seems to be in order. However, it is impossible to provide an exhaustive study of every word/phrase shared by the two texts. Therefore, I have decided to focus on what seems to be key terms. The choice is based on what emerged from the
repetitive chart in chapter 3 of this study. According to Robbins, repetition of certain words and phrases alludes to major characters and topics in a discourse. Therefore, the analysis will select from the repeated items in chapter 3, from the repetitive chart, items that appear in both texts. These will be treated as possible indicators to some of the topics/themes that run across these texts.

Other topics/themes may however not be represented by way of key terms nor repetition, but may require careful intertextual analysis that seeks to explore especially the portrayal and treatment of female characters in these texts. The different topics/themes will be explored as they arise from the word study as well as from the overall analysis.

4.3.2.1. Key terms between Ruth and Prov. 31:10-31

אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל: A Woman of Courage

I will start with the defining phrase, אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל ‘a Woman of Courage’. This is the main point of intertexture connecting the narrative story of Ruth with the acrostic poem of Prov. 31:10-31. I will then propose that the phrase also provides an overarching trajectory for reading and understanding both the narrative of Ruth and the Woman of Courage.

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35 See chapter 3.
36 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 8.
As noted by Berth Tanner, the phrase at the beginning of 31:10a (אֵשׁ תָּחַיִל) recalls the description of Ruth on the lips of Boaz:37

‘And now my daughter, fear not for all you say to me I will do to you because all my people at the gate know that you are a woman of courage (אֵשֶׁתָּחַיִל) (Ruth 3:11).

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A woman of courage (אֵשֶׁתָּחַיִל) who can find? For her value is far more than corals (Prov. 31:10).

It is interesting to note that in Ruth (3:11) the phrase appears as a passing note by Boaz regarding Ruth. In the latter text however, it is used as both the subject of the acrostic poem of Prov. 31:10-31 as well as the personal title of the woman at its centre.38 Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that in Prov. 31:10-31, the poet is dedicated to revealing in detail what is entailed in the phrase ‘a woman of courage’.

רי ner: House

In the narrative of Ruth there are a few references to רי ner ‘house’ (Ruth 1:8, 9; 2:7; 4:11) but it is never Ruth’s house. This becomes רו לן ‘her house/hold’ in Prov. 31 (vv.15, 21, 27). In both texts ‘house’ is repeated four times as shown below:

38 Likewise Szlos (‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 98), has observed that by making the Woman of Courage the sole subject of Prov. 31:10-31, the poet places significance on this woman.
Return each woman לָבָתָה לְמַעַת לָבָתָה ‘to her mother’s house’ (Ruth 1:8)

May he (the Lord) help each of you to find מַעַת לָבָתָה ‘a resting place’
in the בת לְבָתָה ‘house of her husband’ (Ruth 1:9)

She has been working from morning till now and only sat a little in הבת ‘the house’ (Ruth 2:7)

And the Lord make the woman who is coming into בְּת לֶבָת ‘your house’...(Ruth 4:11)

Vis-a-Vis

...and she gives prey לָבָתָה לְבָתָה ‘her house/hold’... (Prov. 31:15)

She will not fear from snow לָבָתָה לָבָתָה ‘her house/hold’, because all of לָבָת ‘her house/hold’ is in scarlet clothing (Prov. 31:21)

She watches the ways of לָבָת ‘her house/hold’... (Prov. 31:27)

Many scholars have observed the striking and unusual reference to ‘mother’s house’ in Ruth 1:8. As noted by Ilona Rashkow, Naomi’s intended destination for her daughters-in-law, each to her ‘mother’s house’ is surprising given the overriding significance of the ‘father’s house’ throughout the Hebrew bible.\(^{39}\) Normally widows return to their ‘father’s house’.\(^{40}\)

\(^{39}\) Ilona Rashkow, ‘Ruth: The Discourse of Power and the Power of Discourse’ in A Feminist Companion to Ruth ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 26-41. See also Carol Meyers (‘Returning Home: Ruth 1:8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth’ in Feminist Companion to Ruth ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], pp. 85-114) who likewise maintains that reference to ‘mother’s house’ is surprising because it would be more common to have widows return to their father’s house. The examples cited by Meyers to support her claim are Gen. 38:11, Lev. 22:13. She concludes that the ‘mother’s house’ appears in this text in a brilliant and resoundingly female tale and its significance should be investigated so that it stands on its own as a social term and as a signifier of a female text.

\(^{40}\) Rashkow, ‘Ruth: The Discourse’, p. 29.
Worth noting is that, reference to ‘mother’s house’ is used only once in the narrative of Ruth (Ruth 1:8). It is not given much significance by the author. Therefore to suggest as does Meyers, that it is of prominence in this text (Ruth 1:8)\(^{41}\) is hyperbole. This is particularly so given Naomi’s self-contradiction in the next verse (Ruth 1:9) in which, as though she wants to correct her earlier statement about the girls returning ‘each to her mother’s house’ (Ruth 1:8), she turns around and wishes them to find a ‘resting place each in her husband’s house’ (1:9). Consequently, the mention of ‘mother’s house’ is undercut immediately by Naomi.

The use of the noun בּי in Ruth 4:11 is worth a comment. It is Boaz’s house. Interestingly, it is in recognition of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth in which case Ruth is referred to as the woman coming into Boaz’s house (Ruth 4:11). We may well recall that earlier in the narrative, Boaz spoke of acquiring Ruth (Ruth 4:5). Thus it is not surprising that even though the two are now married, the house remains Boaz’s so that we may conclude that Ruth is coming into that house as one of Boaz’s acquired possessions. Therefore ‘house’ in this narrative is symbolic of the patriarchal culture in which, as observed by Ellen F. Davis, all legal rights resided in the institution of the ‘father’s house’.\(^{42}\)

Remarkably, in Prov. 31:10-31 the house is significantly identified as the Woman of Courage’s, בּּה ‘her house’. This is repeated throughout and hence may be viewed as a hint to the significance it is awarded in this text. As observed correctly by Meyers, ‘mother’s

\(^{41}\) Meyers, ‘Returning Home,’ pp. 94-96.

house/hold’ is represented in Prov. 31:10-31 even though the phrase as such does not occur. Its usage in the poem places the woman of courage in a position of power; she is the owner of the house unlike her predecessor, Ruth, who is merely an adjunct to her male other. There is also the mention of ‘gates’ in both texts.

וּבְחַד מִלְתֶּן: Gates

There is also the mention of שְׂעָרֵיהֶם ‘gates’ in both texts:

...all my people at the שְׂעָר ‘gate’ know that you are a woman of courage (Ruth 3:11)

Boaz went up to the שְׂעָר ‘gate’ and sat down there ...(Ruth 4:1)

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Her lord is being known in the שְׂעָרֵיהֶם ‘gates’...(Prov. 31:23)

...and let her deeds praise her at the שְׂעָרֵיהֶם ‘gates’ (Prov. 31:31)

In the narrative of Ruth, the gates are first mentioned in relation to the presumed recognition of Ruth’s courage by those who occupy that space (Ruth 3:11). The next time they are mentioned, is when the gate members (who are exclusively male) decide on Ruth’s destiny

As observed in chapter 3, the recurrence of the phrase ‘in the gates’ in Prov. 31:23 and 31, marks the switch from the focus on the husband being known as he takes his place among the renown elders there (v. 23), to the call for his wife (the Woman of Courage) to be extolled in the same place (v. 31). This turnaround of the gates events in Prov. 31:10-31 is an indication of how the poet uses, and radically reconfigures the themes from the Ruth narrative. However, the polemic and subversive message of Prov. 31:10-31, especially with regard to the reconfiguration of the ‘gates’ phenomenon, will be explored further in chapters 6.

The interplay regarding the verb וַיָּדַע, ‘to know’ in both Ruth 3:11 and Prov. 31:23 is worth a comment. Ruth is known to be ‘a woman of courage’ by those in the gates (Ruth 3:11) and likewise her lord/husband is known in the gates (Prov. 31:23). There is perceivable contrast involving how each of the subjects gets to be known at the gates. It is not an exaggeration to conclude that Ruth has made an impression on those in the gates through her own initiative. Even though the text does not explicitly tell us why everyone in the gates knows Ruth to be a woman of her calibre, this is both implied and inferable from the narrative itself. Considering that Ruth has chosen to stick with her mother-in-law, Naomi, against social conventions and against the harshness of her own personal predicament, Ruth deserves to be ‘known’ /respected. At one level, this is the sense one can safely make of the assertion in Ruth 3:11

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44 Read Ruth 4.
46 Pressler, Joshua, Judges and Ruth, p. 265.
47 Ruth is in a predicament after losing her husband. One would imagine that in such a situation it would have been easier for her to stay back in Moab among her own people. However Ruth chooses to stick with Naomi who is also in a difficult and painful situation after losing both her sons and her husband. For so acting selflessly in order to give support to Naomi, Ruth deserves public appreciation.
48 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 896. Fox equates the term ‘to be known in’ in the context of Prov. 31:23 with the term ‘to be respected’. Clifford (Proverbs, p. 276), equally explains that ‘to be known’ in Prov. 31:23, should be understood in the sense of being respected, recognized and praised. I am convinced that this is the same meaning to be applied to the context of Ruth:3:11: Ruth is also respected, recognized and praised given her acts
by Boaz. Ruth has made a big sacrifice to be with her mother-in-law and to give her support in every way she could and for this she deserves acknowledgement. At another level however, Ruth’s actions of loyalty to Naomi are undoubtedly propelled by her desire and determination to secure a name for her deceased husband. The primary motif of the story of Ruth is that of the loyal, childless widow who obtains an heir for her deceased husband. This is plausible given what transpires as the events of the story unfold. Ruth ends up finding and marrying Boaz, to redeem the name of her deceased male others (Ruth 4:10). The point is, despite the underlying motif behind her actions, Ruth is well worthy of being known/respected for she has demonstrated such selflessness and initiative that cannot be ignored or undermined by anything.

On the other hand, the husband of the Woman of Courage (her lord), is known at the gates for no apparent initiative or doing of his own. It is through his association with the Woman of Courage that he gets the respect at the gates. The poem shows him to be cravenly passive. Thus his place at the gates is not on his own accord, no wonder the poem ends by calling for reversal of the obvious imbalance (Prov. 31:31). Frankly, the Woman of Courage and not her lord/husband, deserves recognition at the gates on the same footing as Ruth; for her initiatives and her courage.

of courage displayed throughout her narrative.

49 Katrina J.A. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 39. Esther Fuchs (‘The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible’ in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* ed. Alice Bach [New York: Routledge, 1999], p. 135) maintains convincingly that Ruth is extolled for her faithfulness to her late husband’s patrilineage. She contends that what turns Ruth into a biblical heroine is the fact that Naomi is her mother-in-law and hence following her, finding and marrying a direct relative of Elimelech, her father-in-law, and giving birth to children to carry on the name of her late husband is what counts.

50 Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, p. 49. Larkin asserts that there are two main themes in the book of Ruth. She insists that the first one is the theme of the rescue of Elimelech’s line and the second is that of נקבה (loving kindness, steadfastness and loyalty). Ruth 4:10 is witness to the first theme as Boaz announces that he has acquired Ruth to be his wife so that the name of the dead man may not be cut off from his kindred and his inheritance. He emphasizes that the reason is to maintain the name of the dead man.

51 This point has been reiterated by other scholars including Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, p. 896; Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman*, p. 89.
4.3.2.2. Female Characterization in the Narrative of Ruth and Prov. 31:10-31

It is noteworthy that throughout the narrative of Ruth, Ruth is identified as a Moabite woman (Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). There is emphasis on her Moabite ethnicity\(^\text{52}\) and hence her foreignness. Significantly, the recurring emphasis on Ruth’s foreign descent echoes other biblical narratives about Moab which as noted by Lee, are marked by scandal and animosity.\(^\text{53}\) Moabite women are especially known for seducing Israelite men and leading them to religious apostasy (Num. 25:1-3; 1 Kings 11:1-3, 7 and 33).\(^\text{54}\)

Having said that, it is not surprising what transpires at the threshing floor (Ruth 3:7). Ruth is shown to act in ways stereotypical of her gender and ethnicity as a Moabite woman. Different scholars have provided myriad conclusions and interpretations of the threshing floor events.\(^\text{55}\) However, in general scholars agree that what happened there was a seduction endeavour.\(^\text{56}\)


\(^54\) Lee, ‘Ruth the Moabite’, p. 90.

\(^55\) For example, Gail C. Streeter (The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 69) argues that Naomi coached Ruth on how to seduce Boaz. Therefore, for Streeter, what Ruth did was an act of seduction. Adrien J. Bledstein (‘Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth were Written by Women’ in A Feminist Companion to Ruth ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield academic Press, 1993], pp. 127) concludes that if the translations were correct in assuming that Boaz and Ruth were not yet married at this stage, then the threshing floor event would have been just for sexual titillation.

\(^56\) Many scholars hold that the Hebrew description of what happened at the threshing floor (Ruth 3: 5-8) has sexual overtones. For instance Darr (Far More Precious, p. 65) maintains that elsewhere in the Hebrew bible, the meaning of הָעָלַת ‘to lie down’ refers to sexual intercourse (Gen. 19: 32, 33; Ex. 22:18; 2 Sam. 13:14). Tull (Esther and Ruth, p. 68) also asserts that sexual overtone is inescapable in this case. She adds that not only is the Hebrew word meaning to ‘lie’ (used three times in v. 4) often used in the sexual sense of to ‘lie with,’ and not only is הָעָלַת ‘uncover’ used often used in reference to sex (Hos. 2:12), but that even the word הָעָלַת innocuously translated as ‘feet’ is related to a common biblical euphemism for genitals (Dan. 10:6). Nielsen (Ruth, p. 68) too argues that the words to ‘lie’ and ‘lay’ are keywords in Ruth 3, and they emphasize the sexual overtones of the meeting at the threshing floor. He maintains like Tull that ‘feet’ is a euphemism for sexual
Ruth’s seduction (Ruth 3: 7) of Boaz plays on the concept of a foreign/strange woman who seduces an Israelite man. By making herself sexually available to Boaz,\(^57\) Ruth as a foreign, Moabite woman, acts as a harlot as is common for Moabite women (Num. 25:1-3; 1Kings 11:1-3, 7 and 33). Nonetheless Ruth gets rewarded for her otherwise unbecoming behaviour which should normally be met with antipathy and condemnation.\(^58\) The question is why?

It will not be an overstatement to conclude that it is because she is acting in the interest of her male others that Ruth gets away with her licentious behaviour.\(^59\) We have already noted that she is driven by her desire to secure a name for her deceased husband (Ruth 3: 9; 4:5). Her actions at the threshing floor also seem to favour Boaz (another male figure), even though he is the supposed victim (Ruth 3: 3-9). He appears to feel lucky that Ruth has chosen him for her seduction. This is implied in his words:

> May you be blessed of the Lord my daughter, for you have showed more kindness now than before by not running after younger men, rich or poor (Ruth 3:10).

Boaz seems happy about what Ruth has done to him. Therefore, he does everything to protect her. He ensures that she stays with him for the night, in which case there is still sexual

\(^{57}\) Tull, *Esther and Ruth*, p. 68.

\(^{58}\) Read Deut. 23: 3-6. As purported by Lee (‘Ruth the Moabite’, p. 90) it is this hostility towards Moabite women that later provides the rationale for forced dissolution of marriages to foreign women in Ezra-Nehemiah. This will be discussed further in the next chapter. Worth noting too is that the story of Ruth recalls that of Tamar, the Canaanite woman (Gen. 38). As argued by Nielsen (*Ruth*, p. 17) both women are marginalized by being foreign women who use sexual means to get their way.

\(^{59}\) Ruth’s behavior is a play on the Strange Woman as fully represented later in Prov. 1-9, who is described as a ‘foreign women and a prostitute’. The woman seduces men. In the latter text however, the strange woman is shunned as one whose ways lead men to death and darkness. The characterization and descriptions of the Strange Woman of Prov. 1-9 will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
overtones in his speech, asking her to ‘lie’ until morning (Ruth 3:13). He ensures the protection of her reputation so that no one knows she went to the threshing floor (Ruth 3:15). He even rewards her with six measures of barley (Ruth 3:15). Given the events of the episode, it is inevitable to conclude that Ruth must have sexually pleased Boaz.

Emphasis on Ruth’s identity, as a Moabite woman, cautions us to the marginal, stereotypical position she occupies in the patriarchal context of her story. It is doubtless that she is a peripheral character whose value is only measured by what she does for her male others. However, the threshing floor event, not only serves to expose the stereotypical characterization of Ruth as a Moabite seductress, but importantly foils the revelation that she is אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל ‘a woman of courage’ (Ruth 3:11).

As already mentioned, both Ruth and the Woman of Courage are characterized powerfully as women of courage. Nevertheless there is evidence that these women are also depicted in stereotypical terms that are demeaning as well as being portrayed in a positive light. We will discuss the negative aspects evident in their depiction before turning to the positive traits.

4.3.2.2.1. Women as Subservient and Subordinate to Men

*Women as Men’s Possession*
It is worthwhile noting that both the narrative of Ruth and the poem on the Woman of Courage are set in a man’s world. Many scholars have observed that the patriarchal culture of ancient Israelite society has left its prints on these texts. In the book of Ruth this is articulated in Boaz’s question about the identity of Ruth in the following:

Whose girl is that? (Ruth 2:5).

Katheryn P. Darr contends that patriarchy obtrudes in Boaz’s question about Ruth’s identity. The question presupposes that women are both the property and the responsibility of men, first their father and then their husbands.

It may be argued that the meaning of Boaz’s question is reconfigured in the rhetorical question at the beginning of the poem on the Woman of Courage:

... who can find? (Prov. 31:10a)

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60Esther Fuchs, ‘Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative’ in Women in the Hebrew Bible ed. Alice Bach (NY: Routledge, 1999), pp. 77-83.
61Darr, Far more Precious, p. 73.
62 Darr, Far more Precious, p. 73. Tod Linafelt (‘Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth’ in Interpretation Vol. 64/2 [2010], pp 117-129) alluding to similar sentiments maintains that the answer given by Boaz’s servant overseer implies that Ruth is not attached to any man (Ruth 2: 5-6).
63 It is important to note here that the Hebrew term נָצָא ‘to find’ may also be translated as ‘to acquire’ e.g. Hos. 12:9; Job 31:25; Lev. 12: 8 and Gen. 26:12. Both meanings lend support to the connection I see between Boaz’s question and the rhetorical question in Prov. 31:10a.
Lurking beneath both questions (Ruth 2:5 and Prov. 31:10a) is the patriarchal treatment of women as not only possessions for men but to serve their interests. This leads us to the next theme observable from both the narrative of Ruth and Prov. 31:10-12.

Women Serving Men’s Interests

In the narrative of Ruth, it is stated that Boaz’s marriage to Ruth is meant to serve her deceased husband’s interest:

And Boaz continued, ‘when you acquire the property from Naomi and Ruth, the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the dead man so as to perpetuate the name of the dead man upon his estate’ (Ruth 4:5).

We have already noted that Ruth’s choices appear to be instigated largely by her yearning to serve her late husband.\(^6^4\) This is despite that we initially get the impression that Ruth, first and foremost, shows her commitment to Naomi (Ruth 1:16-18) a thing which is later reiterated by the women of Bethlehem (4:15). No wonder even the child that she bores is said to belong to Naomi. Nonetheless, it suffices in the rest of the narrative that as tellingly argued by Carol Meyers, no matter how courageous Ruth and Naomi may seem, their praise worthy actions must be seen as serving male interests.\(^6^5\) Thus, in sticking with her mother-in-

\(^{64}\) Refer back to the discussion on pp. 139-140 above. See also Sarojini Nadar, (‘A South Indian Womanist Reading,’ p.164) who points out that Ruth’s role is defined only in terms of her familial relationship to Elimelech’s family, as the wife of one of Elimelech’s sons.

\(^{65}\) Carol Meyers, ‘Returning Home: Ruth 1:8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth’ in A Feminist Companion
law, seeking to secure the future of their family, Ruth (as well as Naomi) is an upholder of patriarchal ideology for she works in the interest of a man’s name and inheritance. Zefira Gitay summarizes this well when she asserts that ‘Ruth does not restore her own rights but, rather her late husband’s rights for his land.’

The idea is echoed, though in a slightly different manner, in the following statements about the Woman of Courage:

The heart of her lord trusts in her and he lacks no spoil (Prov. 31:11)

She does him good and not evil all the days of her life (Prov. 31:12)

Her lord is known in the gates, in his seat with the elders of the land
(Prov. 31:23)

In Prov. 31:11, 12 and 23, the poet takes on these aspects, reminiscent of Ruth, and invests them with a deeper meaning in a new context. In that way the themes are not only amplified but reconfigured and reformulated. The Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 becomes a better version of Ruth in some ways. Initially both women (Ruth and the Woman of Courage) are marginalized in so far as they act to serve male interests. However the woman of

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66 Meyers, ‘Returning Home’, p. 89. Danna N. Fewell et.al. (Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990], p. 12) likewise note that Ruth’s loyalty is not just to Naomi but to her dead husband, dead brother-in-law and dead father-in-law; See also Fuchs (‘Status and Role of Female,’ p. 78) who maintains that Ruth is a paradigmatic upholder of patriarchal ideology. She exchanges her own family, country, and god for those of her dead husband.


68 It is evident that in Prov. 31:10-12 the poet portrays the Woman of Courage as one who acts to serve her male
courage transcends the marginalization. The rest of the poem shows her to be acting in ways that overturn the stereotyping of the female inherent in these initial verses (vv. 10-12) and in Ruth. She engages in humanitarian deeds (v. 20) and in business transactions (vv. 13, 14, 18 and 24). All these she does independently of any man and for the benefit of many others and not just her male associates. Therefore the Woman of Courage challenges the status quo and overthrows the patriarchal ideology behind the construction of Ruth. However, further discussion on how the Woman of Courage sabotages the patriarchal ideology of the text, will be carried out in chapter 6.

*Men Determining Women’s fate*

Another theme that transpires in this intertextual analysis is the portrayal of men as determining the fate of their female counterparts. This subtle and yet significant feature permeates the scenes at the אָרָה ‘gates’ as noted by Darr regarding the Ruth narrative.

The events in Ruth 4:1-7 may be summarized as follows:

Boaz goes up to the gates to meet with the other male elders there in order to discuss Ruth’s future. He reports to them that Naomi has returned from Moab and has come

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69 Fox, *Proverbs 15-31*, p. 890;
70 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 28.
71 On the contrary, Ruth acts independent of any man but it is for the sake of a man. See McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 39.
72 Darr, *Far more Precious*, p. 73.
back with her widowed Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. These men are to determine what happens to these two widows whose future lies in the hands of their late male associates’ male kindred. They decide that Ruth’s levirate marriage to Boaz is the solution (this is my own summary of the events in Ruth: 4:1-7).

What happens at the gates regarding Ruth’s life is evidence of how male perspectives and interests predominately determine women’s destiny.73 The scene in Ruth 4:1-7 is echoed in Prov. 31:23 but it is reconfigured and hence takes on a deeper meaning in Prov. 31:31.

Her lord is known in the gates in his seat among the elders of the land (Prov. 31:23)

Give to her of the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her at the gates (Prov. 31:31)

Like Boaz, the husband of the Woman of Courage gets involved in the judicial matters at the gates.74 Nevertheless there is no implication in the latter text that the husband makes a decision regarding the Woman of Courage’s life or destiny. Furthermore, in the concluding verse on the Woman of Courage (Prov. 31:31), there is a command addressing the gate members (male elders), to give to the Woman of Courage ‘from the fruits of her hands’. Alter summarises the verse beautifully in the following words: ‘Let her enjoy the benefits of the

73 Darr, Far more Precious, p. 73.
74 For comments regarding the husband of the Woman of Courage’s participation in the activities of the gates see Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 1066. Fox asserts that this man must have belonged to the assembly of elders to discuss communal affairs, conduct business and adjudicate conflicts. Alter (The Wisdom Books, p. 333) too maintains that the husband who is famed at the gates evidently took part in the deliberations at the gates.
affluence she has amassed, and at the same time let her be praised for what she has achieved.’

By so concluding the poem, as illustrated in Alter’s words above, the poet evidently critiques the concept of men determining woman’s fate. Prov. 31:31 reconfigures and overturns the patriarchal tradition otherwise evident in the narrative of Ruth. Men can no longer serve their interests by deciding the fate of women as the poet gives an imperative in Prov. 31:31 that justice will prevail if the woman gets her recognition based on what she has earned. Therefore it is not a matter of what the men in the gates think or want for the woman, which is often to the satisfaction of their own interests, instead it is what the woman has earnestly achieved that must speak for her.

Prov. 31:31 might be read as an indication of the poet’s insistence that a deserving woman must have her place at the gates. The imperative statement ‘let her deeds praise here in the gates’ (v. 31b) might be interpreted as a polemic against the predominance of otherwise undeserving males at the gates. Consequently the poet seeks to bring an end to the gates being a male dominated and controlled space. This idea will be developed further in chapter 6 of this thesis.

76 The conclusion I am giving here about ‘undeserving males in the gate’ is based on what transpires in the poem especially in v. 23. The question is ‘why should the husband of the Woman of Courage be the one who is famed there while he is otherwise portrayed as passive compared to the woman. Therefore I see him as undeserving of such a position of public prestige. Read that way, v. 31 sabotages the patriarchal ideology that awarded this man the place (and many others who likewise may have obtained the position just because of their male gender) instead of his wife who has worked tirelessly and hence deserves public respect and appraisal.
4.3.2.2. Women’s Positive Traits

There are other more positive points of intertexture between Ruth and Prov. 31:10-31 regarding the female characters of Ruth and the Woman of Courage. These are as follows:

*Loyalty and Commitment to family*

Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi, her mother-in-law, in the following statement:

Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow after you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you sojourn I will sojourn; your people shall be my people and your God my God (Ruth 1:16).

The pledge represents the first step of Ruth’s courage manifesting in loyalty/commitment. We have discussed the underlying motif regarding Ruth’s loyalty as partly her desire to secure a name for her deceased husband.78 This driving force cannot however diminish the fact that Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi is remarkable. It ‘crosses ethnic and religious boundaries and flies in the face of social conventions’.79 It is an example of what loyalty entails.80 By so

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78 See p. 139-140 above.
79 Pressler, Joshua, Judges and Ruth, p. 265.
pledging (Ruth 1:16), Ruth provides the basis for Naomi to trust her.\textsuperscript{81} She is not only selfless and loyal but also trustworthy. This neither tones down the underlying reasons for Ruth’s choice nor can be trivialized by such. Remarkably, even though it turns out that she acts to serve her deceased male other, Ruth embarks on an extraordinary act of loyalty and support to another woman, Naomi.\textsuperscript{82}

Prov. 31:11 slightly reconfigures this theme of loyalty. It is exemplified in the context of a marriage relationship in which the Woman of Courage shows faithfulness to her lord (master husband) and hence makes him trust her:

\begin{quote}
The heart of her lord trusts in her and he lacks no spoil (Prov. 31:11)
\end{quote}

The Woman of Courage is not driven by the same motives as we saw in the case of Ruth. Her husband is alive unlike Ruth who shows loyalty to her deceased husband. Like Ruth however, the Woman of Courage also secures a place and hence a name for her lord, this time in the gates (Prov. 31:23). Therefore by redirecting the theme of loyalty, through recontextualization, the poet of Prov. 31:10-31 manages to highlight this theme and set it as a possible paradigm for human relations at different levels. Loyalty is possible and probably even desired in and for all human relations.


\textsuperscript{82} This is a point strongly emphasized by Dube, ‘Divining Ruth for International relations’ in Other ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible ed. Musa W. Dube (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), p. 179. Jon L. Berquist (Reclaiming Her story: The Witness of Women in the Old Testament [St. Louis, Missouri: Chalise Press, 1992], p. 144) on the other hand radicalizes Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi by asserting that Ruth offered to marry Naomi. My contention however is that to suggest a marriage between the two women is not supported by the narrative in which Ruth ends up marrying Boaz. In my opinion, Ruth’s pledge and her clinging to Naomi, is an expression of radical commitment but not marriage to Naomi.
Goodness and Kindness

About the woman of courage it is stated:

She does him (her lord/husband) good and not evil...(Prov. 31:12).

Her palm she spreads out to the poor and her hands she stretches out to the needy (Prov. 31:20).

Her mouth she opens in wisdom and the law of kindness is on her tongue (Prov. 31:26).

The above listed verses exhibit in explicit ways the good and kind deeds of the Woman of Courage. Her deeds of kindness are first rendered to her lord (vv. 11, 12, 23) and to the rest of her family (vv. 15, 21 and 27); they overflow to the fringes of society to affect the poor and the needy (v. 20). 83 In v. 26 the goodness and kindness of the Woman of Courage are further accentuated and brought to a climax. That is, throughout she has been shown to act in insightful ways and in v. 26 it is stated outright in the form of a concluding statement about her wise and kind speech. Verse 26 therefore accentuates these qualities of a Woman of Courage.

83 As noted by Alden (Proverbs, p. 221) the noble woman (as he calls her) is the walking example of Prov. 11:25 which says ‘be generous and you will prosper; help others and you will be helped.’ Alden further explains that Prov. 31:20 shows that the woman is not so busy with her own household that she forgets the needs of others. She is a generous person who gives to the needy. Clifford (Proverbs, p. 275) maintains that the same hands and palms that are so industriously busy spinning inside the house are now turned to the poor outside the house. He notes convincingly that the chiasm in vv. 19 and 20 links this woman’s industriousness with her generosity. Waltke (The Book of Proverbs, p. 520) notes that this woman is open handed to provide palpable needs to the powerless and disadvantaged.
Read through inter-textual eyes, the verses resonate with the goodness and kindness of Ruth to Naomi. This is apparently well known around town and can be deduced from Boaz’s speech:

‘It has been reported to me what you have done to your mother in law after the death of your husband...’ (Ruth 2:11)

And he said, ‘may the Lord bless you. You have shown even more kindness now than before. You did not run after younger men ...’(Ruth 3:11)

And in the women of Bethlehem’s assertion in Ruth 4:15:

‘...and your daughter who has loved you and is better to you than seven sons’

(Ruth 4:15)’

The correlations between Ruth and the Woman of Courage, evident in the preceding verses further indicate how the latter invests phenomena from Ruth with a new life and meaning. Ruth acts with kindness towards her mother-in-law under somewhat obligating circumstances. Naomi is family to Ruth; she is elderly and is grieving the loss of her husband and two sons and hence is bereft of her immediate family. Therefore Ruth’s choice to stick

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85 See the discussion by Jacqueline Lapsley, ‘Seeing the Older Woman: Naomi in High Definition’ in *Engaging*
with Naomi is perfectly understandable. Naomi needs someone, particularly someone from the family like Ruth to see her through. Both women are vulnerable and perhaps as Pressler puts it, Ruth knows that she is the only family that Naomi has left and hence chooses radical solidarity with her. She could choose to go back to her mother’s house where her status will be less precarious. Ruth acts with utter kindness and mercy towards Naomi. Nonetheless, her actions of loyalty, love and kindness cannot be dissociated from her need (and Naomi’s) to survive in the patriarchal context and culture. As a result her actions are not autonomous but are within the boundaries of patriarchy. On the contrary the Woman of Courage’s loyalty and kindness transcend the cultural patriarchal boundaries.

The Woman of Courage (Prov. 31:10-31) reconfigures Ruth’s actions because she acts beyond familial responsibility, cultural expectations and dictations. She is not forced by a predicament like Ruth for she is neither widowed nor sonless (vv. 11, 12, 23 and 28 are witness to this). Therefore she acts autonomously, adding an extra lustre over and above the Ruth narrative.

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As noted by Pressler (Joshua, Judges and Ruth, p. 284) the story is set in a man’s world. This is a world in which without the presence of male associations in their lives, in the form of husbands and or sons, women are vulnerable. Lee (‘Ruth the Moabite’, p. 96) expressly observes that Ruth is in a vulnerable position with no legal, social or emotional ties to the community (except to another widow). Naomi too is vulnerable with no male representative for she is widowed and sonless. Therefore both women are in a predicament and their existence is precarious. See also the discussion by Athalya Brenner, ‘From Ruth to the ‘Global Woman’: Social and Legal Aspects’ in Interpretation Vol. 64/2 (2010), pp. 162-168; Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, p. 143.

See the discussions by, Lee ‘Ruth the Moabite’, pp 89-101.

Laura E. Donaldson, ‘The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes,’ in Vernacular Hermeneutics, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 20-36. Donaldson observes that Ruth’s love embodies the love of a woman-identified woman who is forced into the patriarchal institution of levirate marriage in order to survive. Pressler (Joshua, Judges and Ruth, p. 284) too asserts that the story of Ruth is about women in a man’s world doing what they have to do to survive.
Industriousness and Commitment to Family

Both Ruth and the Woman of Courage are industrious women who are also committed to the welfare of their families. We have already discussed how both women have displayed loyalty and kindness/goodness to their families. Also their industriousness is to the benefit of their families which further reveals their extreme commitment to their households. Ruth takes the initiative and shows zest to work with her hands as stated in the following:

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘let me go, I pray you, to the field and gather among the ears of corn after him in whose eyes I may find kindness’

(Ruth 2:2)

And she said, ‘let me glean, I pray’ and ‘she gathered among the sheaves after the reapers and she comes and remains from morning until now’ (Ruth 2:7)

Tull has convincingly argued that Ruth 2:7 indicates that Ruth’s work ethic has impressed the servant overseer. On a slightly different note, Pressler insists that Ruth’s determination to glean illustrates her commitment and initiative but also underscores the two widows’ poverty. Therefore in as far as gleaning was the prerogative of the poor, Ruth is acting

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90 See pp. 158 above.
91 Stanton argues that Ruth desires to work, for she believes in the dignity of labour and self-support. See Stanton, ‘The Book of Ruth’, p. 22. This is supported by the events that follow Ruth’s arrival in Judah in Ruth 2. Ruth takes the initiative to go and glean in the fields, thereby being proactive.
92 Tull, Esther and Ruth, p. 61.
93 Pressler, Joshua, Judges and Ruth, p 278. Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, ‘Ruth’ in The New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. II [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998], p. 919-946) explains that Ruth and Naomi live in a society in which women have to depend on men to survive. This is a world in which without fathers, husbands or sons, women are denied access to legal and financial structures of the community. He adds that these women are
within the bounds of the culture. Nevertheless it is inescapable to appreciate her initiative and determination to find means for her and Naomi’s survival. She enacts courage in the face of the harshness of her situation.

Ruth’s industriousness finds a better expression in the Woman of Courage. While Ruth’s is closely linked to her needs for survival within cultural boundaries, the latter is free of such and hence takes the qualities to another level. The Woman of Courage is shown to be acting autonomously and beyond the patriarchal stereotyping of the female. She gets involved in business dealings (vv. 14, 18, 24), buys, owns and manages land (v. 16), and she is a shrewd seller (vv. 11, 18, 24) and buyer (vv. 13, 14). For instance:

She seeks wool and flax and joyfully works with her palms (Prov. 31:13)

She is (like) a ship going around; she brings in food from afar (Prov. 31:14)

And she arises still in the night and gives prey to her house and a portion to her maidens (Prov. 31:15)

She considers a field and takes it; from the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard (Prov. 31:16)

She perceives that her gain is good; her lamp will not be quenched in the

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94 See the discussion by Gail C. Streeke, *The Strange Woman*, pp. 10-11. Berquist (*Reclaiming Her Story*, p. 145) also explains that Ancient Israelite law required farmers to leave small portions at the corners of their fields unharvested, to allow needy persons to take the leftovers for themselves. Therefore Ruth’s gleaning is well within cultural boundaries and expectations.

95 Brenner, ‘From Ruth to the ‘Global Woman’, p. 163. Brenner has concluded that Ruth becomes a migrant worker in the fields in order to find food for her and her mother-in-law.

night (Prov. 31:18)

Linen garment she makes and sells and belts she gives to the traders (Prov. 31:24)

She will not fear from snow to her house, because all of her house is in scarlet clothing (Prov. 31:21)

Strength and honour are her clothing and she laughs to (at) the coming day (Prov. 31:25)

She watches the ways of her house and does not eat bread of sluggishness (Prov. 31:27)

Summarized, the above verses are indicative, not only of the woman’s industriousness but also reveal that she is proactive, zealous and thoughtful as well as a shrewd entrepreneur. In addition, she is selfless, independent, resourceful and wealthy and hence the portrait is of a woman capable of many things. She is also a woman who has her family at heart and ensures their well-being at all times (vv. 15, 21 and 27).

The Woman of Courage significantly transcends Ruth who even though being an industrious, hands-on individual, does not go beyond the culturally reserved roles for a woman in her

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97 Alden, *Proverbs*, p. 220. Alden has noted correctly that v. 13 begins the actual catalogue of the activities of this woman. Van Leeuwen (‘Proverbs’, p. 26) expressing similar sentiments, maintains that vv. 13-20 and 21-31 detail the woman’s great industry and wise competence in a dialectic of acquisition and provision. Fox (Proverbs 10-31, p. 893) equally has concluded that vv. 13-27 is an appraisal of the woman by itemizing her deeds thereby defining ‘courage’.

98 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, pp. 31 and 49.
position. Ultimately, Ruth is stereotypically constructed and portrayed and does not escape the patriarchal constraints. Conversely, as demonstrated above, the Woman of Courage surpasses the patriarchal stereotyping of a woman by engaging in the sort of myriad activities beyond the culturally prescribed ones for the female other.

Audacity

Ruth displays her audacious qualities by first daring to follow her mother-in-law to a strange land (Ruth 1:16). She then takes another step of boldness to go out in search of a place to glean in which case her hope was to find someone who might show her favour (Ruth 2:2). Lastly, Ruth places herself in a more precarious spot by walking alone at night, making herself sexually vulnerable to a man who has been drinking and to do whatever he says (Ruth 3: 6-9). Likewise the Woman of Courage shows her audacity in her execution of her roles as the breadwinner for her household. This is especially implied in the metaphors employing warlike terminology, namely הָעָבֶד ‘spoil’ (Prov. 31:11) and the hunting metaphor, יָרָד ‘prey’(v. 15). The importance of these metaphors and others will be explored further in the next chapter.

4.3.2.2.3. Concluding Remarks

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99 As a widow, foreigner, sonless /childless woman, Ruth’s options are limited to gleaning and finding a redeemer in a levirate marriage. She pursues and fulfills these cultural expectations to the end.
100 Tull, Esther and Ruth, p. 68.
It is worthwhile noting that the three women studied so far in this intertextual endeavour, namely, the woman of Prov. 12:4, Ruth and the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 are powerfully denoted as women of courage.\footnote{We already highlighted in Chapter 1 that these are the only three instances in the entire Hebrew bible where, the term אישה לוח ‘courage’ has a woman as its subject.} It has equally sufficed that even though so unusually depicted as women of courage, the portrayals of the three women still show allegiance to the patriarchal nature of the biblical accounts with regard to women/female depictions. We have demonstrated how in all the three texts, the powerful description of women of courage is immediately sabotaged by the patriarchal definitions of women as of subservient status in relation to their male associates. The women are also regarded as possessions by men and for their service.

Importantly, however, in Prov. 31:10-31 the portrayal of the Woman of Courage, not only echoes those of the other two women (Prov. 12:4 and the book of Ruth) but reconfigures and transcends them. Beyond the heavily implicated and yet compressed statement of Prov. 12:4, Prov. 31:10-31 provides details on its subject. Prov. 12:4 does not go beyond the patriarchal assertion that ascribes and equates a woman’s worth with her good service to her lord (master/husband) ‘as a crown on his head’. While the short saying (Prov. 12:4) leaves the reader with a single sided view of its subject אישה לוח, a view which is patriarchal and hence denigrating, the latter (Prov. 31:10-31) takes it further and turns it around. In the detailed portrait of Prov. 31:10-31 we are made aware that, there is much more to אישה לוח than otherwise suggested by Prov. 12:4. We learn from Prov. 31:10-31 that the woman here described (in both Prov. 12:4 and 31:10-31) is an all rounded individual whose deeds and character cannot be downgraded to just serving her male other.
Over and above Ruth, the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 has been shown to exercise autonomy and initiative beyond the patriarchal definitions and expectations. Ruth, though a woman of courage, is first of all, a Moabite woman. She seduces Boaz, as fitting of her identity but because she is doing it for the sake of the men (her deceased husband and also as a treat for Boaz) she is not shamed for it. All of Ruth’s positive traits are revealed through her conformity to cultural expectations which are also patriarchal. On the contrary, the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 goes beyond the stereotypical roles of wife and mother to engage in trade, estate ownership, shrewd selling and buying. She is a woman who is not conforming to the patriarchal culture and definition of a good woman. In sum, the Woman of Courage sabotages the very patriarchal ideology that gave birth to her in the first place. This will be explored further in chapter 6 later.

4.3.3. The Woman of Courage in the light of Woman Wisdom

The analysis will now move on to discussing the intertextual relationship between Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9 and the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31. It is important to note here that some of the themes discussed in the preceding discussions on Ruth and the Woman of Courage may reappear in the following discussion. This is because texts about women/female figures in the Hebrew bible bear the same mark; they are male’s anthologies of female characters. Therefore it is inevitable to find similarities that run across most, if not all, female characterization in these texts. We will avoid the tautology by dwelling on fresh themes and ideas that will arise from this next exercise. Those themes that may have already been touched on will be treated only briefly.
A comparison of the characterization of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage reveals similarities in a number of areas as follows:

**Treasures to be found by Men**

Both Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage are portrayed as treasures to be found. For instance, about Woman Wisdom it is stated:

Happy is the man who finds wisdom... (Prov. 3:13)

I love those who love me and those who seek me shall find me (Prov. 8:17)

**Vis-a-Vis**

A Woman of Courage, who can find? (Prov. 31:10a)

There is echoing of Woman Wisdom (as demonstrated by the above listed verses) in the portrayal of the Woman of Courage according to v. 10a. It has already been argued in the preceding discussion that the rhetorical question of Prov. 31:10a diminishes its subject to a commodity and property in the hands of the prospective finder.
Both Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage are said to be more precious than jewels.\textsuperscript{102}

\textit{More Precious than Jewels}

She is more precious than corals and all pleasures cannot compare with her (Prov. 3:15)

For Wisdom is better than corals...(Prov. 8:11)

\textit{Vis-a-Vis}

For her value is far more than corals. (Prov. 31:10b).

The description not only underlines the value of these women, but further reduces them to objects. This is evidenced by the comparison of these women to non-persons, namely, corals/jewels thereby putting them in the same category as that of the inanimate.

\textit{Benefactors for Men}

But he who listens to me shall dwell in security and shall be at ease from the dread of evil (Prov. 1:33)

\textsuperscript{102} Camp, \textit{Wisdom and the Feminine}, p. 188.
Do not forsake her and she will keep you; love her and she will guard you (Prov. 4:6)

Prize her highly and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her (Prov. 4:8)

She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful garland (Prov. 4:9)

Vis-a-Vis

The heart of her lord trusts in her and he lacks no spoil (Prov. 31:11)

She does him good and not evil; all the days of her life (Prov. 31:12)

Her Lord is known in the gates as he sits among the elders of the land (Prov. 31:23)

It is evident that both women are defined and valued in terms of the benefits they provide to their male others.  

Bringing Honour and Reputation to Men

Woman Wisdom promises honour and good reputation to those who will follow her:

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103 The addressee (and hence the benefactor) in Prov. 1-9 is the young man/son. In Prov. 31:10-31 the benefactors are clearly labeled: it is first the husband of the Woman of Courage; her house/hold and the poor and needy in the community (vv. 15, 18, 20, 21 and 27).
And you will find favour and repute in the eyes of men and God (Prov. 3:4)

Prize her highly and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her (Prov. 4:8)

Long days are in her right hand and in her left are riches and honour (Prov. 3:16)

Abundance and honour are with me...(Prov. 8:18)

Vis-a-Vis

Her lord is being known in the gates in his seat with the elders of the land

(Prov. 31:23)

The promise of honour is made alive in the reality of the man who has married the Woman of Courage. He gets to have honour bestowed on him by the deeds of the woman.\textsuperscript{104}

\textit{Providing Riches and Security to Men}

The patriarchal voice of the father advises the son in the following words regarding Woman Wisdom:

\textsuperscript{104} Yoder, \textit{Wisdom as a Woman}, p. 89. Yoder convincingly maintains that the husband’s social prominence among the elders of the land is to be attributed to the woman. She insists that the Woman of Courage makes a name for her husband. McCreesh (“Wisdom as Wife”, p. 27) argues that, whatever the husband’s gain is (Prov. 31:11b), it is the result of the trust he has placed in his wife and all of her activities. He further comments on the close association between the husband’s position at the gates with the works of his wife and maintains that this may not be taken for granted.
Long days are in her right hand and in her left are riches and honour (Prov. 3:16)

Do not forsake her and she will keep you; love her and she will guard you (Prov. 4:6)

She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown (Prov. 4:9)

Woman Wisdom herself makes the following claims:

But he who listens to me shall dwell in security and shall be at ease from the dread of evil (Prov. 1:33)

Wealth and honour are with me; enduring riches and righteousness (Prov. 8:18)

I give riches to those who love me; and their store houses will be filled (Prov. 8:21)

The above statements imply that a man who chooses Woman Wisdom will have wealth, security, honour and good reputation bestowed upon him.¹⁰⁵ This is echoed in the depiction of the Woman of Courage. This woman rigorously engages in wealth generating activities

¹⁰⁵ See also comments by Yoder (Wisdom as a Woman, p. 96). Alter (The Wisdom Books, p. 229) also comments that the assumption is that the exercise of wisdom yields prosperity. Therefore just as is practically experienced by those who come into contact with the Woman of Courage (this includes her household, the poor and the needy), so will Woman Wisdom’s client experience prosperity.
that ultimately secure a future for her entire household including her master/husband. These aspects have already been explored when discussing her industriousness, kindness/goodness and commitment to her family. The following verses provide a fitting summary to that end:

The heart of her lord trusts in her and he lacks no spoil (Prov. 31:11)

She does him good and not evil all the days of her life (Prov. 31:12)

She seeks wool and flax and joyfully works with her palms (Prov. 31:13)

She considers a field and takes it; from the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard (Prov. 31:16)

She will not fear from snow to her house, because all of her house is in scarlet clothing (Prov. 31:21)

Her lord is known at the gates in his seat with the elders of the land (Prov. 31:23)

She watches the ways of her house and does not eat bread of sluggishness (Prov. 31:27)

Hawkins summarizes the portrayal of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage as an indication that both women are worth the time and effort.\textsuperscript{106} That is, like the young man addressed throughout Prov. 1-9, the man who is married to the Woman of Courage is lucky for he has found a special woman. This is a woman who accumulates riches and secures an economically stable future for her husband and the entire household.

\textsuperscript{106} Hawkins, ‘The Woman of Noble Character’, p. 16.
Although there is no immediate parallel between Prov. 31:12 and the description of Woman Wisdom, McCreesh maintains that the same thing could be said of Woman Wisdom. This is reasonable given the promise in Prov. 1:33 above. The assurance of security and freedom from fear of evil dealings to the one who will marry Woman Wisdom by heeding her advice, is brought to reality in the experience of the man who has married the Woman of Courage (v. 12). In sum, liaison with Woman Wisdom is echoed and brought to life in the relationship between the Woman of Courage and her household. Just as the former promises a life of stability, luxury and happiness from her earnings, so does the Woman of Courage give such to her household (this will be discussed shortly).

Commitment to Households and the Community

This theme is so closely related to the previous one above and hence we will not quote the verses again here. Camp summarizes the theme well when she proclaims that:

Just as Wisdom calls all people to the security, happiness and wellbeing of her house (Prov. 8:34; 9:1-6), so also the works of the Woman of Courage assure not just the comfort and peace of her household (31:21) but extend the abundance to the poor and the needy (31:20).  

107 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 43.
108 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p. 83.
109 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 189. Yoder (Wisdom as a Woman, pp. 99-100) similarly maintains that especially Prov. 31:21 echoes the promises of Woman Wisdom of a life of stability which culminates in her
We have seen how the Woman of Courage’s deeds for her household are itemized throughout from vv. 13-27. The repetition of ‘her house/hold’ (Prov. 31:15, 21, 27) is an important signifier to the idea that the woman here described is a benefactor to her entire household. It underscores the Woman of Courage’s commitment to the smooth running of her household.¹¹⁰

Engaged in Business

Woman Wisdom is presumably a lucrative business woman as inferable from the following:

For she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold (Prov. 3:14)

With me are riches and honour; lasting wealth and righteousness (Prov. 8:18)

My fruit is better than gold, and my yield better than choice silver (Prov. 8:19)

¹¹⁰ Meyers, ‘Returning Home’, p. 107. Meyers insists that the poem describes a woman skillfully managing all aspects of a complex household. She directs the members of her household in their various responsibilities; she participates in actual physical labor in a variety of household tasks, especially the production of textiles. She is in charge of her household’s acquisition of property and its participation in the market economy of the day. She also provides moral leadership for her household. Therefore the repetition of ‘her house/hold’ is an indication to some of the themes inherent in the poem.
Yoder holds that echoing and elaborating on the father’s teachings to the son, Woman Wisdom testifies to her own earnings. Likewise the Woman of Courage is described as a savvy business woman (vv. 14, 18, 24). She echoes Woman Wisdom’s claims to business and importantly concretizes them. The significance of this theme will however be developed further in chapter 6.

*Traversing Public Spaces*

Woman Wisdom is portrayed as one who takes her stand and cries out in the gates. This is the place where she announces her benefits to the simple minded young men:

At the head of the noisy streets she cries out, at the opening of the gates to the city, there she has her say (Prov. 1:21)

Besides the gates, at the city entrance, at the openings she cries out (Prov. 8:3)

McCreesh has noted the significance of Woman Wisdom’s call as happening in very public places; the streets, the market place and the gates (Prov. 1:20-21; 8:3, 34; 9:3). In the same

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111 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman*, p. 83.
112 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman*, p. 81.
114 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 44.
vein, Lang asserts that the streets were a symbol for public life and the gates were a place for public recognition and execution.\textsuperscript{115} Woman Wisdom traverses these very public spaces.

It is noteworthy that while her forerunner is busy making appeals at the gates, the Woman of Courage secures her husband a place there.\textsuperscript{116} Not only that, the poet issues a command to have the Woman of Courage praised and perhaps even take her position there as befitting her deeds of courage (Prov. 31:31). Importantly, the Woman of Courage like Woman Wisdom navigates her way in the public spaces in her business endeavours. For instance:

She seeks wool and flax and joyfully works with her hands (Prov. 31:13)

She is like the merchant ships bringing her food from afar (Prov. 31:14)

Linen garments she makes and sells and belts she gives to the traders (Prov. 31:24)

While it is not blatantly stated that the Woman of Courage goes out to the market places, it is however implied in the above listed verses. Given that this woman goes out to look for raw materials to use in her textile production (v. 13),\textsuperscript{117} it is likely that she goes away from her home in order to ‘hunt’ for such.\textsuperscript{118} In addition to the Woman of Courage’s

\textsuperscript{115} Lang, Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs, pp. 22-23.

\textsuperscript{116} It has already been argued earlier that her lord’s place at the gates among the elders (Prov. 31:23) cannot be dissociated from her courageous deeds.

\textsuperscript{117} Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 893. Fox holds that according to v.13, this woman does not only do the weaving but, she actively seeks the necessary materials and gives herself to the task with zest. Alden (A Commentary, p. 220) comments that judging from vv. 13, 21, 22 and 24, this woman spends a good part of her time buying raw materials, spinning, weaving and sewing.

\textsuperscript{118} Roland E. Murphy et.al., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. 155. Murphy maintains that the comparison of this woman to merchant ships implies that she is active
resourcefulness, v. 13 brings to view, albeit by suggestion, her involvement beyond the domestic walls. Likewise vv. 14 and 24 underline her activities outside the home. She does not only resonate with Woman Wisdom’s portrayal but gives her life and strips her of abstractness.

Speaking Wisdom and Kindness

As usual, Woman Wisdom is depicted as making her pleas. She is testifying to her wisdom, as demonstrated below:

Listen for I speak noble things; my mouth utters uprightness (Prov. 8:6)

For my tongue declares truth and my lips detest wickedness (Prov. 8:7)

In the right are my mouth’s sayings, nothing in them is twisted or crooked (Prov. 8:8)

On the other hand the Woman of Courage is declared by the poet, to speak both wisdom and kindness:

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in acquiring things beyond her immediate home circle.

119 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 43.

120 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman*, pp. 90-91. Yoder maintains that the Woman of Courage moves about, buying and selling, in the market places and around the storehouses. Camp (Wisdom and the Feminine, pp. 189-190) expresses a similar idea by asserting that this woman functions predominantly in her home but that regularly her work carries her to the public domain. Ultimately what we have in Prov. 31:10-31 is the picture of a woman who is not confined within the domestic world of her house but one who moves freely, traversing realms, the domestic and the public.

121 Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, p. 893.
Her mouth she opens in wisdom and the law of kindness is on her tongue (Prov. 31:26)

The Woman of Courage is a living example of Woman Wisdom. She actualizes Woman Wisdom’s claims as illustrated by her wise speech that is also flavoured with kindness.

4.4. Conclusion

An intertextual analysis of Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of Prov. 12:4, Ruth and Prov. 1-9 (Woman Wisdom) has yielded significant insights. The exercise has shown both similarities and differences in the way these texts present their female characters.

Insights from the intertextual study here discussed may be summarized into two broad themes with several issues covered under each. The main themes are: typical descriptions/ depictions of women by patriarchy and those that subvert that patriarchy.

4.4.1. Characteristic Depictions of Women by Patriarchy

1. According to the patriarchal ideology behind the texts studied in this chapter, women are first and foremost characterized as possessions in men’s hands. Ruth is classified
as one of the properties of her deceased male others to be acquired by the redeemer, namely, Boaz (Ruth 4:5, 9-10). Likewise, both Woman Wisdom and the Woman of courage are described as assets /treasures to be acquired by men.

2. Women are to serve men’s interests and purposes. In the narrative of Ruth, it is for the sake of perpetuating the name of her deceased male others (her father-in-law, her brother-in-law and her husband) that Ruth marries Boaz and bears a son. We saw this similar image in the portrayal of the woman of Prov. 12:4 who is described in terms of her services to her male other as ‘a crown on his head’ (v. 4a). The idea was carried further in the portrayal of Woman Wisdom, whose main targets are the males who must acquire her. Echoing these three texts (Ruth, Prov. 12:4 and 1-9), the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 is said to do her male other ‘good’ (Prov. 31:12a) and ultimately she secures him a place of honour at the gates (v. 23).

3. We have also observed from the analysis that women are treated with suspicion as potentially capable of destroying their male counter parts. This is particularly seen in the depiction of the Strange Woman throughout Prov. 1-9. It is also discernible in the antitheses of Prov. 12:4b and 31:12b. Ultimately the patriarchal mind perceives female images in dichotomy so that a good woman always versus an evil/bad one.

4. In all the texts studied in this chapter, the male other is placed above his female counterpart. This was observed in the presumed ownership of Ruth by Boaz who acquires her through levirate marriage. The same is true for Woman Wisdom who is to be acquired by men. This is further echoed in the title used for the husband in Prov. 12:4 and 31:10-31, namely, ‘her lord/master’.
5. All the women in the texts analysed are depicted as dedicated to the well-being of their households. They are selfless in their execution of good deeds for their families. Ruth, for instance, abandons her own people and religion to follow her mother-in-law in her bid to remain faithful to her deceased husband. This unfolds in her struggle to secure a redeemer. The Woman of Courage even takes risks in order to supply for the needs of her household, rising up while it is still night to hunt for their food (Prov. 31:15). Woman Wisdom too, is committed to the well-being and happiness of those who will abide in her house (Prov. 9:1-6). The same idea is indirectly present in the subtlety of Prov. 12:4 concerning the husband of the woman of courage of this proverb.

4.4.2. Depictions of Women that Subvert Patriarchy

The intertextual analysis has also revealed that beyond Ruth and the woman of Prov. 12:4, Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage act in ways that challenge and subvert the norm. This may be represented as another main theme resulting from the intertextual study.

1. Both woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage are presented as entrepreneurs who move about the market places doing business transactions. Woman Wisdom is shown to frequent the public spaces of the gates and the streets in her search for clients who are foolish males needing to acquire wisdom. The Woman of Courage also moves
freely in the public sphere in her merchandise profiteering and hence is said to be ‘like merchant ships going around…’ (Prov. 31:14).

2. Both Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage speak with wisdom.

3. Both women are said to stretch out their hands to help others beyond the domains of domesticity. In the case of Woman Wisdom it is to the simple, foolish and uninstructed males that she extends her hand to invite and embrace, and in the Woman of Courage it is to the poor and the needy.

The analysis has further demonstrated that the Woman of Courage not only uses phenomena (lexical and thematic parallels) from other texts but importantly reconfigures, reformulates and transcends them. It has been shown that the description of the Woman of Courage has adopted lexical items as well as thematic ones from the description of the woman of courage of Prov. 12:4. In Prov. 31:10-31, the ideas from Prov. 12:4 have been reformulated by way of thematic amplification and elaboration. Details otherwise omitted in Prov. 12:4 have not only been developed further but have also been reconfigured. Through the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31, we get to know what is implied in the terseness of Prov. 12:4; the patriarchal ideology that equates the value of the woman by her service to her husband. Importantly the is challenged in Prov. 31:10-31 which portrays its woman as someone who is much more than a chattel in the hands of her male other and for his service.

The portrayal of the Woman of Courage also adopted phenomena from that of Ruth. However the Woman of Courage has been shown to surpass the cultural boundaries that
governed Ruth, dictating her choices. The depiction of the Woman of Courage also sabotages the subservient position and definition of woman inherent in the characterization of Ruth. Ruth’s positive traits are shown through her acting in accordance with the culture; being a childless widow (especially sonless) her options are limited to securing a male redeemer through levirate marriage and gleaning in the fields for her food. Still being a Moabite woman, she is stereotypically shown to have seduced Boaz in order to get what she wanted and needed in order to secure her place in the patriarchal social system. Without doing what she did, Ruth would have been doomed to a precarious existence as a woman without a male representative. On the contrary the Woman of Courage acts autonomously as not just a mother and wife, which are stereotypical roles for women in that culture, but she deals in business, buys and owns land and reaches out to the community as a philanthropist. Her business deals see her traversing the public space.

Finally, the Woman of Courage has been shown to bring to life the pleas by Woman Wisdom. Her lord/husband and her entire household have been presented as beneficiaries of the luxuries, security and honour otherwise pledged by Woman Wisdom in Prov. 1-9. She stands above all the other women presentations in the intertextual dialogue of this chapter. In a nutshell, the Woman of Courage presents a paradigm of female autonomy for women to emulate.
Chapter 5: Socio-cultural Texture of Proverbs 31:11031

‘Every Meaning has a Context’

Robbins’ Social and cultural texture is very detailed. Simplified, however, social and cultural texture can be understood as an investigation into the world of the text in order to establish three main aspects of the text in question. These are, the social and cultural context of the text, how the text as part of that context reflects, responds or critiques it and, what the text wishes to impart or nurture among its readers.

Consequently, texts are contextually located in terms of social and cultural backgrounds that not only produced those texts but, inevitably, influenced them in different ways and to varying degrees. Knowledge of such backgrounds is important for understanding texts. Thus to do justice, an interpretation of texts requires one to interact with the social and cultural values, beliefs, and customs of the people who wrote and received the text(s) in question. The question is; how can modern interpreters get knowledge of the socio-cultural background of biblical texts?

To resolve the issue, I have decided to explore other texts thought to be approximately contemporaneous with Prov. 31:10-31. This is in accordance with Robbins’ analysis of the social and cultural texture in which he has suggested that one way to get knowledge about the distinctive features of a text is to compare it with others. The exercise however, should not

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1 Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 305.
2 For a more detailed discussion of what social and cultural texture entails refer back to chapter 1.
3 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of texts, pp. 71-72.
4 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 1.
5 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, pp. 91-92.
be confused with inter texture analysis. The main difference between the two textures is that intertexture concerns the text’s configuration of phenomena from other texts, while the social and cultural texture concerns the text’s attitude to its socio-cultural context.

The assumption is that the text’s similarities as well as differences with other contemporary texts can give hints to the social, cultural frame of reference, world view and common knowledge of the people who produced and received the text. This view is shared by other scholars including Waetjen who asserts that when biblical texts are torn from their original contexts, they require some historical mediation in order to overcome the distance between those texts and contemporary-modern readers. Consequently I will endeavour to explore the socio-cultural world from which the text arises. This will help us to determine whether the text is a critique or an upholder of its socio-cultural values, norms and beliefs especially with regard to women and their status in the socio-cultural stratum.

It is important to note that not all the biblical texts presumed to be contemporaneous with Prov. 31:10-31 will be investigated. The choice of texts to be investigated for the purpose of this chapter is based on their relevance to the feminist/womanist theory. The insights from the investigation will be used to determine to what extent Prov. 31:10-31 is a part of its social and cultural context, how it responds/critiques that very context as well as investigates its main precepts.

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6 See the meaning of intertexture in chapter 1, p. 35.
7 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, p. 3.
8 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, p. 3.
9 Waetjen, ‘Social Location,’ pp. 75-93.
5.1. On Re-constructing the life of Ancient Israel in the Post-exilic /Persian Period

Reconstruction of any aspect of the life of ancient Israel during the exilic/post-exilic periods has never been an easy task. This is primarily because there is lack of reliable sources as articulated by Charles E. Carter. The biblical text which is the primary informant in this endeavour is particularly ideological in nature. As scholars agree, the biblical writers were not concerned with writing history for the sake of history, but rather, in the words of Carter, ‘they sought to validate their positions of power and to impose a particular religious perspective on the inhabitants of the province, or to challenge the status quo’. On the other hand, archaeological records pertaining to ancient Israel are sparse and inconclusive making it hard to put the pieces together. To this effect Carter maintains that biblical literature should be given high priority in any endeavour to reconstruct the life of Israel at this time. Nonetheless, we must consider the biases of the biblical account and hence its ideologies in our reading.

When it comes to reconstructing the lives of biblical women the task gets even harder. Biblical materials that pertain to women are for the most part, in the words of Newsom, ‘shaped by the concerns and perspectives of men’ and hence we need to take extra caution to read between the lines’. This perspective is shared by several feminist scholars who argue profoundly for the male-authorship of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, and how stories about

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11 Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud*, p. 21. See also Carol Meyers (‘The Domestic Economy of Early Israel’ in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* ed. Alice Bach [New York: Routledge, 1999], pp. 33-43) who also maintains that the Bible is a biased source of information and those biases must be recognized.
12 Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud*, p. 22.
women in these texts are male blueprints for female behaviours.\textsuperscript{16} As suggested by Bach, our
challenge is to find ways in which we can reach stories of women in a world shaped by male
perspectives and interests.\textsuperscript{17} This is the task I endeavour to carry out in the following
discussion.

5.2. Women in the Post-exilic/Persian period Israel

The post-exilic era or Persian period relates to a time in the history of Israel about the latter
part of the 6th to the 4\textsuperscript{th} century BCE when Israel was under Persian rule.\textsuperscript{18} It was a
significant era in the life of Israel in that they had just returned from exile. The returnees were
faced with the task of restructuring their lives after a strenuous time of military, economic
and religious upheavals.\textsuperscript{19} In reading biblical literature from this period, we begin to wonder
where the women are because at first glance they seem to be absent.\textsuperscript{20}

The aim of this section of the study is to venture into the difficult task of rediscovering and
reconstructing the lives of Israelite women. My focus is on establishing from this analysis the
general portrayal of women, their positions and roles in that society, at that time. The Post

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{16} Bach, ‘Man’s World, Women’s Place’, p. xiii. More importantly Bach encourages modern readers to read
with what she calls bifocal lenses, aware of how their modern attitudes challenge those that gave birth to ancient
texts. Meyers (\textit{Everyday life’}, p. 251) likewise maintains that the Bible is entirely androcentric, in its subject
matter, its authorship and its perspectives. This characteristic of the biblical material has led to individual
women being ignored by the text and also issues relating to women being only minor or tangential. See also
\textsuperscript{17} Bach, ‘Man’s World, Women’s Place’, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{18} Tamara C. Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Post-exilic Era’ in \textit{The Historical Books},
\textsuperscript{20} Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows’, p. 349.
\end{footnotesize}
exilic/Persian period is particularly important to this study because (as already argued in chapter 2), it is assuming that the text of Prov. 31:10-31 was written during this time.\(^{21}\)

In what follows, I will explore some of the texts dated to a similar period as Prov. 31:10-31 and these are: 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther. Their dating to the post-exilic/Persian period is almost certain.\(^{22}\) I will also look at Prov. 1-9 which is probably also from the post-exilic/Persian period and is closely related to Prov. 31:10-31.\(^{23}\) Although these are in no way exhaustive, they are representative and sufficient to give us insight into the lives of women in that period.

5.2.1. Women in 1 and 2 Chronicles

When reading the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles one is confronted by a list of genealogies of those who returned from exile, henceforth the returnees (1Chr.1-9).\(^{24}\) The chronicler\(^{25}\) places

\(^{21}\) Refer to chapter 2 above.

\(^{22}\) Steven L. McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pp. 113, 145-147. McKenzie maintains that the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were written in the fourth century B.C.E which places them in the post-exilic/Persian period. He places the books of Ezra-Nehemiah in the same period. Concerning the latter he argues that the frequent reference to the Persians and Persian policy in Ezra-Nehemiah raises their relationship to history. This suggests that the writing of these materials must have occurred during the historical framework of the Persian imperial monarchy. Nelson (The *Historical Books*, pp. 149, 166) also asserts that the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles retell the history of Judah from the perspective of the post-exilic /Second temple era. This is normally dated to about 400-350 B.C.E. He further postulates that Ezra-Nehemiah was also written about the same time as the Chronicles. David J. Clines (The *New Century Bible Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [Grand Rapids: Marshall Morgan & Scott (Publications), 1984], pp. 14, 272) too locates the dating of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther to the post-exilic period. Jon D. Levenson (Esther: A Commentary [London: SCM Press, 1997], p. 23) likewise maintains that the narrative of Esther takes place in the time of the Persian Empire. This is the time when Persia was under the rule of king Ahasuerus (otherwise rendered Xerxes by the Greeks). There is textual proof for the dating of Esther as Ahasuerus/Xerxes is the king to whom both Vashti and later Esther, the two female protagonists of this tale, were married (read Esther 1-2).

\(^{23}\) Refer back to Chapter 4.

\(^{24}\) McKenzie, *Introduction*, p. 114. McKenzie divides the books of 1 and 2 Chr. into three large sections, of which section one is 1 Chr. 1-9 –Genealogies of the tribes of Israel.
emphases on the works of the Priests and the Levites who were men. For this reason it is highly likely that the chronicler was male. The temple and the temple worship are also given importance in these books. However, there is reference to a limited number of women figures in the genealogies as well as mention of Judah’s queen mothers (1Chr. 1:1-9:34). For instance, some of the queen mothers mentioned by name include Bathshua, the mother of King Solomon (1 Chr. 3:5); the Ammonite Naamah, the mother of King Rehoboam (2 Chr. 12:13); Maacah the mother of King Asa (2 Chr. 15:16). As Laffey rightly concludes, the names of these women were recorded simply because of their association with prominent males. They were either the wife to a prominent husband or former king, or mothers to prominent sons or daughters to prominent fathers.

In I Chron. 23:22 and 25:5 there is reference to two groups of women who are only referred to as daughters. These are the daughters of Eleazar and Haman respectively. It is intriguing that it is their fathers’ names that are spelt out and not theirs. This is clearly the bias of which the biblical data is a culprit and for which it often faithfully displays its support.

5.2.2. Women in Ezra-Nehemiah

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26 McKenzie, *Introduction*, p. 113. McKenzie further insists that other than the text’s emphasis on the role of male religious personnel (the Levites and the Priests), ancient Near Eastern society is well known for restricting literacy to particularly upper-class males.

27 This point has been aptly articulated by Laffey (‘1 and 2 Chronicles’, pp. 120-121) who explains that generally in ancient Israel, a woman’s prestige derived directly from the males to whom she was attached. These could be the father, husband or the son(s) she bore.
The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are treated as a single work in the Hebrew canon. On a similar note, Eskenazi maintains that Ezra-Nehemiah constitutes a single book in most ancient manuscripts and that it is best treated as such. However, many scholars have noted that the Christian tradition has regarded these books as separate books at least from the time of the Christian scholar Origen in the third century. Without going into details to prove/disprove the oneness or not of Ezra-Nehemiah, I will assume that it is a unified work and will treat it as such.

The Post-exilic/Persian period was a pivotal time in Israel’s history. This was a time after the Babylonia exile. The returnees were faced with the difficult task of reconstructing/rebuilding their homeland. They also had to deal with issues of reaffirming themselves as a people of Yahweh; their very self-identity. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is a recounting of the events of this crucial time. Importantly, however, the book weaves a specific ideology into the very fabric of its story. Thus it is moulded history: history told from a perspective that is especially patriarchal as well as theological.

My question is, where are the women and how are they involved in the restructuring struggles? It is noteworthy that the work of rebuilding reveals the relatively elevated status of

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30 McKenzie, Introduction, p. 142. McKenzie further asserts that whether these books were originally separate, is hard to say but that most scholars think they were not. See also Eskenazi, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, p. 123. Clines, The New Century Bible, p. 2.
34 Nelson, The Historical Books , p. 167. Nelson argues that although the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is based on sources, most of which are considered to be historically reliable, it places more significance on its theological goals than historiographic purposes. McKenzie (Introduction, p. 156) too points out that the book’s portrait of history has been influenced by its theological concerns.
women during this crucial time. The process of building houses, the Jerusalem temple and the city walls involved both men and women, including the daughters of Shallum (Neh. 3: 12; 4: 10-12). There is also mention of female singers (Ezra 2:65// Neh. 7:67), Noadiah the prophetess (Neh. 6: 14) and the women who were purportedly present at the reading of the law by Ezra (Neh. 8). It also makes sense that as men had to be involved in the guerrilla attacks (Neh. 4: 10-12) women had to be the ones working hard in building and food production. Moreover, women were included as members of the covenantal and worshipping community, together with men (Neh. 1: 2-3). This according to Camp is further witness to the improved status of women during this period. Still in the corpus of Ezra-Nehemiah however, we find information that contradicts and overshadows the desired balanced picture with regard to women’s status in relation to men. A significant issue involving women, which is also disturbing, is the text’s hostility towards intermarriage and the rather lopsidedness of such to the detriment of the women. This is an important issue and warrants further explanation.

We have already noted earlier that one of the tasks of the reconstruction of Israel after the exile involved asserting themselves as a community with a religion. Therefore religious reformation was one of the many reforms carried out during this period. It included the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3: 1-6: 22) and the restoration of observance of the torah (Ezra 7:1-10: 44). Significantly, part of restoring the returnees to the precepts of the torah was a polemic against intermarriage, apparently involving Israelite men and pagan women. This led to a massive divorce of foreign wives (Ezra 10: 1-15; Neh. 10: 28-30; 13: 1-3). It was

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35 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, pp. 258-261.
36 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 259.
37 Refer back to the discussion on p. 189 above.
regarded as a violation of the *torah* (Ezra 10: 2)\(^{39}\) and was condemned so that the wrong doers had to repent. Jacob M. Myers summarizes the drastic events following the hostile teaching regarding intermarriage in the following:

We have wronged our God in that we married foreign wives from the peoples of the land, but now there is, despite this, still hope for Israel. Let us now make a covenant with our God to eject all the foreign wives and their children in accordance with the advice of my lord and those who fear the commandment of our God and let it be done according to the law.\(^{40}\)

McKenzie observes that the most difficult aspect of Ezra-Nehemiah for modern readers is its mandate for the returnees to separate themselves from the foreigners, to the point of demanding the divorce of foreign wives and dismissal of their children.\(^{41}\) He nonetheless recommends that this should be viewed in the context of the returnees’ search for national, religious and community identity.\(^{42}\) Thus in that scenario, mixed marriages were regarded as a threat.\(^{43}\) The community was being consolidated and purged of all potentially corrupt influences.\(^{44}\) This apparently justifies the ordeal of the divorce of foreign women (Ezra 10 and Neh. 13).\(^{45}\)


\(^{41}\) McKenzie, *Introduction*, p. 157. See also Kraemer (‘On the Relationship’, p. 132) who maintains that in Ezra 10 the focus is on separating from foreign women. Therefore the text puts emphasis on ‘foreign women’ but does not mention anything about men, whether native or foreign.


Probing further into the issues concerning women’s lives according to Ezra-Nehemiah, Eskenazi investigates extra-biblical documents in order to seek for further clues on issues pertinent to post-exilic women.\textsuperscript{46} She examines Elephantine documents from Egypt and makes assumptions that however remain questionable. Her conclusion is that Elephantine documents indicate that Israelite women in the post-exilic community had more power and privileges than the biblical texts suggest.\textsuperscript{47} She maintains that the documents contain original contracts and letters which show that women could actually initiate divorce, buy, sell and inherit property just as their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{48} Elephantine marriage contracts are quite detailed as to what happens in the case of a divorce.\textsuperscript{49} In summary, the rules stipulated allowed each partner in marriage equal rights to property.\textsuperscript{50}

While it is important to look at extra-biblical materials from surrounding nations to inform and supplement biblical records, there is the danger of reading too much into the biblical text. This is the mistake that Eskenazi’ seems to be making. Nonetheless, it is commonsense that the fear of mixed marriages with their concomitant loss of property to the community makes most sense when women, can in fact inherit. That is, such fear would possibly not arise if women did not have legal rights to their husbands’ or fathers’ land. Still, in my opinion, this cannot be used as justification for the ill-treatment of foreign wives and their children, especially to the exclusion of foreign men.

\textsuperscript{47} Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows,’ p. 351.  
\textsuperscript{48} Eskenazi, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, p. 125.  
\textsuperscript{50} Eskenazi, ‘Out from the Shadows’, pp. 351-355.
Interestingly, Eskenazi undermines her own assumptions. She confirms that there is no parallel evidence from Judah concerning women’s legal status in the Jewish society at the time; for the book shows no interest in such details.\textsuperscript{51} She even points out that in Ezra-Nehemiah there is no record of any protest from the women or any report of what specific arrangements were in place.\textsuperscript{52} She rightly concludes that these women’s voices are muted by the text.\textsuperscript{53} To use Eskenazi’s words, ‘the women appear to have no choice and no voice’.\textsuperscript{54} As such, the question still remains as to why the biblical text omits such information and to what extent the extra-biblical informants can be adopted?

What I find disturbing and difficult to comprehend is the one-sidedness of the issue. The text states blatantly that foreign women will be divorced and banished together with their children (Ezra 10:2-3, Neh. 13:23-27). The text’s silence on foreign men, whom, one would like to think, must have been married to Israelites women, is a cause for concern. On the whole, it raises suspicion regarding the rights of the women. Furthermore, the text’s silence on these women’s predicament raises more questions than answers. Was marriage and intermarriage a gendered issue in this society, involving only foreign women and not men? How could this be the case? Were the women (in this case, foreign women) regarded as potentially evil and dangerous and hence the need to eliminate them in order to achieve purification and to guard against potential contamination? How did the concerned women feel and what did they say?

This is a matter of concern to readers who seek to see justice done without prejudice. Why does the text favour one gender against the other? What are the implications for women and

\textsuperscript{51} Eskenazi, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{52} Eskenazi, Ezra-Nehemiah’, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{53} Eskenazi, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{54} Eskenazi, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, p. 127.
their status from such a presentation by the text? Can one safely come to the conclusion that it follows necessarily that women in the post-exilic community of Israel did not have a say even when issues directly affected them? From the presentation of Ezra-Nehemiah considered here, it is reasonable to surmise that women in general, native or foreign, occupied a subservient position. Their fate was determined by their male others so that even in the case of marriage, they could be dismissed whenever it suited the men in their lives.

As already seen from Eskenazi’s investigation there is no indication that women in Israel enjoyed the freedom of being mutual partners in marriage relationships. This is not to dispute that women in the region, mainly those from Egypt as recorded in the Elephantine documents, may have enjoyed equal status as men in this regard. The point is that this is not what is implied in the biblical text especially in Ezra-Nehemiah.

5.2.3. Women in Esther

In the book of Esther we are confronted with intriguing stories of two women, Vashti and Esther. These women’s stories will be presented separately so as to award each some amount of attention and details.

5.2.3.1. Vashti: A Woman who Challenges the Status Quo

The brief story of Vashti can be outlined as follows:
At the height of banqueting, an inebriated king summoned Queen Vashti to parade herself like a beauty pageant contestant before a roomful of drunken dignitaries as a fitting last course- a delicious feast for male eyes- for 'she was lovely to look at' (Esther 1:11). Instead of passively doing what she was told, Vashti refused. Following the counsel of his advisers, Xerxes rashly banished her from his presence forever and mandated ‘that every man should be ruler over his household’.55

The story of Vashti,56 summarized above, represents the story of one of the ‘unsung’ heroines of the Hebrew bible. 57 I have noted elsewhere that Vashti’s unpopularity came as a result of her ability to act on her own initiative against what she clearly saw as violence against her integrity as a woman.58 She is a person with a ‘well-developed sense of her own human dignity’.59 Darr writes, ‘Vashti refuses to be men’s sexual object and her husband’s toy’.60 For so acting, Vashti gets punished by total banishment from the king’s sight (Est. 1:19) and from the luxuries of being a queen.61 It is her assertiveness that lands her in trouble.

55 This summary of the brief story of Vashti is by Carolyn Custis James, Lost Women of the Bible: The Women We Thought we Knew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 145.
56 It is important to note that queen Vashti is not Israelite (Esth. 1). However her story sets a tone regarding the treatment of women within the Persian Empire which included the Israelites. The events of the story of the book of Esther are about post-exilic Israel under Persian rule and hence shed light into the lives of all women within its boundaries.
It is interesting to observe that the ramifications of Vashti’s refusal are much larger than a domestic squabble. As Sindie Crawford argues, her refusal to do as demanded by the king is perceived by men (in this story) as a serious threat to the dominance of every husband in the community (Esth. 1:17). Sharing a similar sentiment, Laverne M. Gill asserts that the king’s counsel of eunuchs, which consisted of men alone (Esth. 1:13-14) and no women, told the king that Vashti’s disobedience will cause great harm to the rest of the kingdom (Esth. 1:16). In the same vein, Levenson comments that the queen’s insubordination provokes a state crisis (Esth. 1: 18-22). Thus, ‘the domestic difficulties of the royal couple become an occasion for an imperial edict, deposing Vashti and ordering every man to be master in his own house’.

Levenson insists that the king himself has failed to be ‘master in his house’ and the edict has proved him a conspicuous failure in that regard. This is masculinity at a crossroad. There is evident fear of the ‘powerless woman’ by the ‘powerful men’ resulting from her refusal to comply with their rule. This is ironical. The humour of it lies in the fear that lurks beneath the perception by these powerful men (the king and his courtiers) that the incident will become a possible model of resistance for all (women) wives. That is, women’s acts of independence

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62 Kebaneilwe, ‘The Vashti Paradigm’, p. 378. Darr (Far more Precious, p. 167) explains that Vashti’s impudence would undoubtedly incite other women to disobey their husbands.
64 Laverne M. Gill, Vashti’s Victory and Other Women Resisting Injustice (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), p. 4.
65 Levenson, Esther, p. 2. See also Gill, Vashti’s Victory, p. 4.
66 Levenson, Esther, p. 2.
67 Levenson, Esther, p. 2.
in which they could decide what happens to them poses a threat to the rule of men according to this story. This must be stopped immediately.

What happens to Vashti shows us that while her independence is admirable, we must acknowledge the predicament her clash with authority occasioned for her and other women. She has no acceptable choices. Merely because she voiced her feelings concerning her life, the men feel threatened and therefore she is evicted. She acted against the prevailing norms of the status quo and hence the very core of patriarchy feels challenged. However, what matters is that Vashti does no longer see herself as the property of a man.

Instead of seeing her refusal as a threat to masculine power, as viewed by the eunuchs in the story, Gill asserts that such a stance as taken by Vashti speaks for all women. She is telling women that they too can make a choice to say ‘no’ to oppressive situations at any time. Vashti must be praised for her courage to act against a system that is suppressive. Her actions serve to reveal not only the humour in relation to those in control, but the dangers that accompany their fear of those under their control. Vashti’s refusal constitutes a serious challenge to the patriarchal system because it unmasks its weakness. Since she challenges her

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71 Niditch, ‘Esther’, p. 33. Niditch maintains correctly that Vashti’s actions mark her as a threat to the status quo and therefore she is eliminated.
72 Gill, *Vashti’s Victory*, p. 2.
73 Gill, *Vashti’s Victory*, p. 2.
74 Gill, *Vashti’s Victory*, p. 2
75 Niditch, ‘Esther’, p. 34. Niditch asserts that there is a humorous tone here and it is the humour of those in control. She explains that it is easy to laugh at a potential loss of power when there is no real threat, hence Vashti must be thrown away. In a way therefore, Vashti’s banishment not only exposes the powerlessness of the powerful to their very faces but, at least gives them a sense of security because she will no longer be a threat. She has been erased and thus assures them of security. Fontaine (*Smooth Words*, p. 156) too comments on the humorous nature of this story. She asserts that the text has humour at women’s expense but that that humour turns back upon the men.
subservient role as subject to her master husband, the whole fabric of society will disintegrate. Ultimately, the fear by the leading class results in further power abuse in order to preserve their position. Vashti’s unfair punishment for her legitimate defiance is ‘contrasted with men’s greedy humour and clumsy attempts to force their own rule upon women’.

Notably, Vashti’s ordeal echoes a relationship of master versus subject. The husband is the master who gives orders to his subject, the wife. This is a relationship of power versus powerlessness. Failure to do as ordered by the powerful other results in inevitable punishment. It is implicit that the powerless other, Vashti, is expected to have no say in what happens to her as long as it is in the best interests of her powerful other, her master husband, the king.

5.2.3.2. Esther: An Upholder of the Status Quo but, not Entirely

Esther becomes Queen after the banishment of Queen Vashti (Esth. 2: 16-17). Her story is further revelation of the painful dominance by men over women. Esther, in contrast to her predecessor (Vashti), is portrayed as a stereotypical woman in a man’s world. She says yes to the powers that be. She wins favour by parading her beauty (Esth. 2: 2-8) and by ‘her ability to satisfy sexually’ (Esth. 2: 12-17). Her credentials are thus purely physical and

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77 Wyler, ‘Esther’, p. 130.
78 Fontaine, Smooth Words, p. 157.
79 Darr, Far more Precious, p. 165.
80 Darr, Far more Precious, p. 165; Kristen De Troyer, ‘An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2:8-18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint and the second Creek Text’, in A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and
sexual. Her story alludes to what the king desired earlier with Vashti (Esth. 1:11). Women are to parade their beauty for men’s selfish interests and sexual satisfaction; women must simply comply and never question men’s demands of them. This further reveals men’s desire, as represented in King Xerxes’s desire, to have control over women and their bodies.

Eventually Esther emerges as a heroine. But what has she done and how did she gain her heroic status? The answer is somewhat clear. Esther first complies and conforms to the system’s demands (Esth. 2). Then she becomes a manipulative and scheming woman who also plays on trickery to get her way (Esth. 5). Nevertheless Esther’s acts of courage and boldness within a dangerous and risky patriarchal system cannot be undermined. Thus, the turning point of the story, as correctly stated by Crawford, is when Esther ceases to be dependent on the males surrounding her and instead takes control of the events in her life. She displays boldness in the face of utter vulnerability as she appears before the king unsummoned (Esth. 4:16; 5:1).

From the portrayal of both Vashti and Esther one may conclude that women were almost always at the mercy of their male associates, in this case, eunuchs, husbands and kings. The two women were regarded as property and sexual objects by men, as were all the other unnamed women in the text. These included the virgin women who had to parade before the

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81 Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, p. 159.
83 Niditch, ‘Esther’, p. 41. Crawford (‘Esther’, p. 135) explains that in Esth. 5, Esther lulls Haman into a false sense of complacency and places the king in a position where a strong emotional response from him is guaranteed. Thus Esther skillfully navigates her way within the system through her clever tricks.
king (Esth. 2:1-4) as well as those wives throughout the kingdom who received letters
notifying them that they were subjects to their husbands (Esth. 1:20).

Women were seen as threats to male dominance and everything was done to keep them in
subservience. Nevertheless, the example of the two women in the narrative indicates that
women still found their way within the otherwise very oppressive system. Through their acts
of boldness these women voice their resistance to male oppression. This is exemplified in a
radical way by both Vashti’s refusal and by the brave statement made by Esther that ‘after
that I will go to the King and if I perish, I perish’ (Esth. 4:16).

Does this text shed some light on the life and status of women during the Persian period?
What more does it say about marriage relationships of the time in that society? What does it
tell us about gender relationships? These questions may not necessarily be fully answered in
this chapter but they are important as they shed light on my quest to reconstruct the lives of
ancient post-exilic/Persian period women, their status, roles and the choices available to
them.

5.2.4. Women in Proverbs 1-9

The book of Proverbs is primarily filled with woman talk not by women but by male speaker
(s). It is fascinating and yet disturbing in the ways in which it approaches its subject matter.

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In the first nine chapters, the book offers what can be viewed as a cross-section of femininity and womanhood from the perspective of male chauvinism. Thus the dichotomous presentation of ‘woman’ forms the crux of the matter of the book of Proverbs 1-9.

In these chapters one encounters descriptions of both wisdom and folly (henceforth Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman, respectively). The two female figures are contrasted sharply. There is the superb figure of Woman Wisdom as well as her shameful counterpart, the Strange Woman. Noteworthy is that woman talk provides not only the introduction to Proverbs (chapters 1-9) but the conclusion (31:10-31) of the book as well. Such a position on its own warrants further investigation in order to establish what could be the significance of Proverbs for women and their status. In an attempt to understand the presentation of ‘woman’ through both the figures of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman, I will discuss the portrayals of each separately.

Newsom insists that even though woman is not the sole topic of Prov. 1-9, men’s talk about women and women’s speech occupies a great deal of these chapters.


Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 155. Fontaine explains that in Woman Wisdom we get a synopsis of all the positive roles played by wives and mothers in Israel while the Strange Woman represents all male fears of female temptation. She further maintains that warnings against the Strange Woman in Prov. 5 image her as the negative counterpart of Woman Wisdom; she is Woman Wisdom’s ‘evil twin’. However, contrary to Fontaine’s claim that Woman Wisdom is a representation of roles by wives and mothers, my contention, is that she surpasses such stereotypical roles to take on more public and autonomous roles usually reserved for men. See my intertextual reading of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage in chapters 4 above. Gale A. Yee (Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew bible [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003]), p. 2) too makes reference to the contrasting images of Woman Wisdom and her powerful adversary, Woman Stranger. She further maintains that the book of Proverbs personifies the incontrovertible dangers that these women present to the elite Jewish men in the Strange Woman. The latter is the antithesis of Woman Wisdom who is the object of their desire. Day (‘Wisdom and the Feminine’, p. 121) also points out that the Strange Woman is a counterpart to Woman Wisdom in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs.
5.2.4.1. The Strange Woman: Dangerous Female Sexuality

Yee has convincingly observed that several terms have been associated with the Strange Woman. For instance, she is described as הַרְפָּא הַשָּׁנָה ‘the strange woman’ (Prov. 2:16 and 7:5), הָרֲעָה הָרֳעָה ‘the foreign woman’ (Prov. 2:16; 5:20; 6:24), אֶשֶּׁר הַשָּׁם ‘a foolish woman’ (Prov. 9:13); she is also described as one dressed like הַרְפָּא הַשָּׁנָה ‘a harlot/prostitute’ (Prov. 7:10). She is further portrayed as a scheming, wicked woman as she has to convince her victim(s) of the absence of her husband (7:19-20). She is notably portrayed as, ‘one who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God (2:17)’. She has a house which is the gateway to sheol/underworld (Prov. 2:18). Consequently the Strange Woman represents a path that leads to death (Prov. 5:5). Her speech is seductive and inviting but only leads to a disastrous ending and death (Prov. 5:3; 6:24; 7:5, 21). She is one who devalues the cultic religious observances (Prov. 7:14).

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89 Yee, ‘I have Perfumed my Bed with Myrrh,’ pp. 110- 111.
90 Matthew Goff, ‘Hellish Females: The Strange Woman of Septuagint Proverbs and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184)’ in Journal for the Study of Judaism Vol. 39 (2008), pp. 20-45. Goff observes that it is only in Prov. 2:16 and 7:5 that the phrase הַרְפָּא הַשָּׁנָה is used.
91 Notably, the foreignness of the Strange Woman is not given clarification and hence leaves room for different definitions and interpretations. We shall discuss this shortly.
92 Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 28. Goff maintains that the foolish woman who appears only in Prov. 9:13-18 is not exactly the same character as the Strange Woman. However my opinion is that Goff’s argument that the foolish woman here is a description of a different character other than the Strange Woman is not convincing. I will rather concur with Yee who contends that words such as alien/strange, harlot, evil, adulterous and foolish all refer to the figure of the Strange Woman. Yee’s argument is reasonable given that Prov. 1-9 is primarily about the dichotomous descriptions of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman so that the negative descriptions logically refer to the Strange Woman and vice versa. (‘I have Perfumed my Bed with Myrrh’, pp. 110- 111)
93 Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse’, p. 90. Newsom points out that Prov. 2:17 might be suggesting that this woman has left her husband. This she argues makes her strange/foreign because she is an anomaly who no longer has a place in the system of socially regulated sexuality and hence belongs on the side of the chaotic. Goff (‘Hellish Females’ p. 26) argues likewise that 2:17 in this context probably refers to marriage.
94 Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 156. Newsom (‘Woman and the Discourse’, p. 90) sees the term ‘smooth’ which is used to describe the Strange Woman’s speech (Prov. 2:16) as suggesting both pleasure and danger. She can be perceived as a figure of ambivalence that is both frightening and attractive.
95 Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 156.
one without the slightest sense of morality. Similarly Goff concludes that she embodies attitudes rejected by the book of Proverbs.\footnote{Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 22.}

Worth noting is that the strangeness/foreignness of the Strange Woman is not given clarification, leaving room for manifold definitions and interpretations. It might be taken to mean she is from another tribe, a non-Jewish woman,\footnote{See for example Ex. 29:33. The term קָרָץ here refers to a non-Israelite. In Lev. 22:10 it refers to a non-Aaronite. In Num. 1:51 it refers to a non-Levite. In these cases therefore ethnicity is in view. This view is held as prominent by Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 26.} and hence of foreign ethnicity with possibly a foreign religion,\footnote{See Ex. 30:33 in which קָרָץ refers to one who does not share in the cult.} or even foreign wisdom.\footnote{Johan Cook, פָּרָץ (Proverbs 1-9 in the Septuagint): A Metaphor for Foreign Wisdom’ in ZAW Vol. 106 (1994), pp. 458-475. Cook argues that in the LXX, the Strange Woman symbolizes foreign and dangerous wisdom, namely Greek philosophy from the Hellenistic period.} Foreignness might also indicate that she is being a woman of unacceptable behaviour, one that does not fit into the socio-cultural mores.\footnote{See Lev. 10:1 in which the term קָרָץ refers to an illegitimate forbidden fire; Hos. 5:7 where it refers to illegitimate children; in Ps. 44:21 it is in reference to foreign/forbidden god. Therefore the Strange Woman’s behaviour is regarded as deviant and thus forbidden.} In that case her foreignness does not refer to her ethnicity but her behaviour which is ‘off-limits’.\footnote{Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p 154. Camp (Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 116.}

What does the Strange Woman do? The most elaborate portrait of this woman is in Prov. 7:5-27.\footnote{Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 27.} In this passage she lurks in public places looking for unsuspecting men to seduce; ‘lurking at night; loitering in the streets to ambush her victims (7:12)’.\footnote{Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 27.} She is an overtly sexual figure (Prov. 7:16-18) whose speech is good enough to persuade the victim (Prov. 7:21).\footnote{Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 28.} As asserted by Goff, the text does not dispute that the man who will spend the night
with the Strange Woman would enjoy it.\textsuperscript{105} The text ends on a dire note, reiterating the downfall associated with following the Strange Woman (Prov. 9:18).\textsuperscript{106} This stance may not be taken lightly. Fontaine’s comment concerning the sage’s conclusion in this way is worth pondering:

Woman Folly (the Strange Woman) brings together here, the selective misogyny of the sages as she symbolizes competing religious traditions, foreignness, frightening female ‘otherness’ as well as pragmatic warnings to young male professionals against such fatal attractions.\textsuperscript{107}

What is of interest for my purpose in this analysis is what it means to have a woman portrayed in the way the Strange Woman is being depicted? What are the socio-cultural gender codes lurking beneath this presentation?

At issue in the depiction of the Strange Woman is her sexuality. She appears to exercise some independence with regard to this aspect of her life. This in turn seems to be so disturbing to the existence of the social order, which is patriarchal order in essence. Therefore, the patriarchal figure warns vehemently against any association with the woman. It is intriguing that both the speaker and the listener/addressee are male figures: the father who addresses his son.\textsuperscript{108} This already expresses not just the text’s ideologies\textsuperscript{109} regarding the subject but more

\textsuperscript{105} Goff, ‘Hellish Females’, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{106} Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{107} Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{108} Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse’, pp. 142-143. Newsom claims that the reader of this text is called upon to take up the subject position of the son to an authoritative father; Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{109} Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse, p. 143. Newsom asserts that ideology is seldom as direct as one finds
importantly the subtle fear of what is truly other, female sexuality. As purported by Newsom, the Strange Woman represents ‘the contradiction and dissonance that forces patriarchy to articulate itself, and at the same time threatens to subvert it’.\textsuperscript{110}

Conversely, as mentioned already, the Strange Woman is contrasted with another type of woman, completely different from her and yet sharing one central trait; her femininity/femaleness. This is Woman Wisdom.

5.2.4.2. Woman Wisdom: Desirable Female Wisdom

We have already discussed some of the traits of Woman Wisdom in chapter 4. Therefore, we will not go into details about the woman but will give a brief synopsis of her traits in comparison with the Strange Woman.

It is important to note that Woman Wisdom stands at the other end of the pole in relation to the Strange Woman.\textsuperscript{111} At the same time however, there are fundamental things that the two women have/do in common. Apart from their femininity, Woman Wisdom and the Strange

\textsuperscript{110} Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse’, p .142.

\textsuperscript{111} Primarily, what separate the two women are erotic overtones that characterize the language of/about the Strange Woman. Such language is absent in the presentation of Woman Wisdom. Therefore in so far as sex and sexuality is in view, the two are complete opposites. Alluding to a similar observation Sneed (‘White Trash’ Wisdom’, p. 7), maintains that although Woman Wisdom lures her potential disciples, there is a strange, non-sexual, virginal quality to her. He concludes that, wisdom and sex do not mix.
Woman are competing for the same male audience. They also both take their place in the public space where they seek the attention of their audience. They both have houses.

In presenting Woman Wisdom to the son, the father swings drastically. He reverts from warning against the perils of the Strange Woman to making recommendations for the desirable Woman Wisdom to his son (Prov. 4:8-9; 7:4). She is described as a woman hard to find (Prov. 1:28; 8:17); of high value (Prov. 3:15: 8:11), ‘she is more precious than jewels’. The young man is urged to acquire this priceless woman and to embrace her. There are rewards for treating her with esteem (Prov. 4:6-8). While the other woman’s ways lead men to death and destruction, Woman Wisdom’s ways turn them from the ways of death (Prov.1:33; 2:16; 3:16; 4:6-9) to life (8:35). She is referred to as ‘the tree of life’ (Prov. 3:18).

One important thing to note is that Woman Wisdom is treated with such respect and elevation (8:22-31). Her glamorised descriptions are baffling to the mind, given the predominantly male biased nature of the Hebrew bible. Thus the highly exalted image of the woman has led some scholars to explain her away as a metaphor only while others prefer to view her as a goddess. Nonetheless, the radically high presentation of Woman Wisdom in Prov. 1-9

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113 Read Prov. 1:20-21; 7:12; 8:3.
114 Read Prov. 9: 1-6, 14.
116 The expression echoes the contents of gen. 2:9 and 3:22. For further discussion on this intertextual play read Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse’, p. 91
117 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 116. Camp maintains that Woman Wisdom as a metaphor is a symbolic replacement of the then non-operational monarchy and hence she is a promotion of egalitarian values.
118 David Penchansky, ‘Is Hokmah an Israelite Goddess, and What Should We Do about it?’ in Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader ed. AKM Adam (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), pp. 89-92; Silvia Schroer
presents a complexity and a paradox that may not easily be explained away. My contention is that in the metaphor of Woman Wisdom lies a paradox. The irony, which sheds light into the nature of patriarchy itself, is in the portrayal of woman as both at the periphery (the Strange Woman) and at the centre (Woman Wisdom). Still one may argue that personified wisdom’s (Woman Wisdom) pre-eminence and mysterious relationship with God and as one co-existing with God during creation; further suggests that she is not confinable to places dominated by male humans.\textsuperscript{119}

5.2.4.3. The Strange Woman and Woman Wisdom: the ‘Periphery and the Centre’\textsuperscript{120}

Fontaine maintains firmly that, ‘in general wisdom literature (to which Proverbs belongs) presents us with a paradigmatic illustration of the great paradox observed elsewhere in patriarchal literature with respect to women’.\textsuperscript{121} Newsom captures this paradox when she proclaims that:

\begin{quote}
Metaphorically, in the social fabric of patriarchy, woman is the essential thread that joins the pieces. But equally she indicates the seams where the fabric is subject to tears.\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{119}See for instance, Prov. 3:18-21; 8:22-31.
\textsuperscript{121}Fontaine, ‘The Social Roles of Women’, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{122}Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse’, p. 155.
If woman is fundamental for the existence of patriarchy as ‘she joins the pieces together’ but also stands as a threat to that very existence ‘as the seams where it is subject to tears’ as suggested by Newsom, then patriarchy is caught up in a vicious circle. That is, in presenting ‘woman’ in the two extremes of ‘good and bad’, ‘wise and foolish’, ‘desirable and dangerous’, as does Prov. 1-9, patriarchy reveals its need as well as its fear and suspicious view of the female other. But why is this the case?

For Moi, patriarchy allots a marginal position to women and that concedes them to both the centre and the periphery. In such marginal existence women can both be elevated to represent ‘higher and purer nature’ as well as be belittled as representatives of ‘darkness and chaos’. Within the scenario, Woman Wisdom may be seen to represent the very centre that holds the patriarchal order together. Woman Folly on the other hand, represents a threat to the existence of that same order.

5.3. What is at stake here?

I will contend that the position allotted the female other, in the figures of the Strange Woman and Woman Wisdom, undermines and significantly sabotages the very power of patriarchy. The dichotomous presentation of woman in Prov. 1-9 may be seen as working against and even defeating the patriarchal system. It denigrates patriarchy by exposing the fear that lies at its heart with regard to the female/feminine ‘power’. This is evident in the speeches about the

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124 These are the expressions employed by Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p 167, as cited by Newsom, ‘Woman and the Discourse’, p. 157.
Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman and what they are capable of doing. They both have the potential to overthrow their opponent; patriarchal order itself.

The fear of the powerful female other is immediately observable in the portrayal of the Strange Woman because her ways/deeds, as in the words of Camp, ‘bring within the boundaries of Israel’s communal apprehension the ultimate disorder, namely death’. She (the Strange Woman), therefore, is an apparent threat to the existence of the community as a whole but, more importantly, she is a danger to the patriarchal order that seeks to confine her, but obviously fails. Patriarchy’s failure to contain the Strange Woman is evident in its resort to warning fervently against any associations with her.

Woman Wisdom, on the contrary, asserts her strong will and power in a positive manner. She thus subtly plays on the mind of the sages who seek to maintain patriarchal order. Because she is so powerfully wise, the overarching patriarchal voice finds no alternative but to urge its audience, the young man, to embrace her. To this end, therefore, she also undermines the power of the male/masculine other represented both by the father (the teacher) and by the young man (pupil). In so far as Woman Wisdom represents the way of wisdom, which is equated with life, the male others are compelled to make her their companion. This is evident in the exhortations and admonitions of the father to the son concerning the urgency to embrace this woman (Prov. 4: 5-9). Woman Wisdom stands as the ultimate possession to be sought after by males and for this reason she is powerful. They have to pursue her in order for them to sustain their very existence (Prov. 4:10); after all she is ‘better than rubies and all the

things one may desire cannot be compared with her’ (3:15; 8:11). Eventually, the males are dependent on Woman Wisdom for without her they have no life.

Both Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman present a potential threat that can overthrow the patriarchal order that the discourse earnestly seeks to preserve. The failure by the patriarchal order to confine the two female figurations is further observable in the more public spaces that these two women occupy as indicated in Prov. 1:20-21; 8:2-3 and 7:12. Both women are in the streets and in the market places. These are public places commonly dominated and controlled by males and women are an unusual sight.127 It may be concluded that by presenting these two women as treading these otherwise male dominated places, the discourse is further proving that these two are not confinable.

Female/feminine power clearly transcends the patriarchal margins by rendering itself unconfinable as demonstrated in both Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman. The two female figurations are clearly so invested with such power that it cannot be ignored by the patriarchal voice that dominates these chapters (1-9). They have the power to build or destroy the patriarchal social order.

It is intriguing that the victim in both cases is the male/masculine other whose survival is entirely dependent on his ability to choose one or the other of these female figures. For instance, if he chooses Woman Wisdom then he is guaranteed the ultimate possession which is life, but if he chooses the Strange Woman he is guaranteed the ‘ultimate disorder’ which is

death. These positions held by these two women render the male/masculine other utterly powerless and at their mercy. This sabotages the stereotypical roles that the post exilic Jewish community otherwise reserved for women, especially as displayed in Ezra-Nehemiah and the Chronicles.

The idealized female figurations of Prov. 1-9, bear some resemblance to the women in Esther who despite their marginal position, stereotypically allotted to them, yet proved they were able to overturn the tables. Vashti did so by defending her female dignity with her refusal to act as a striptease in front of a group of men, and Esther manoeuvred the patriarchal system in order to exercise her power.

It is the somewhat extra-ordinary and yet subtle and powerful qualities of femaleness that possibly haunt the minds of the sages. Their fear of the female other leads them to want to protect patriarchal order in the way they do in these chapters (Prov. 1-9). Consequently, patriarchy is at stake. It needs to be protected from the possible destruction by the Strange Woman. The presumably secure and only way to avoid the destruction is to take refuge in the bosom of Woman Wisdom by embracing her.

Fontaine’s conclusion that ‘the elevated female figures such as Woman Wisdom (Prov. 1-9) or the Woman of Worth (Prov. 31:10-31) may be inversely proportional to the truth of real women’s lives’ may not be taken lightly. 128 It is highly likely that real women in the ancient Jewish community may never have lived their lives to their full potential given the patriarchal

system and order of the day. Women were faced with many restrictions and had limited choices as seen in the portrayal of women in the Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther.

Women were hindered from exploring their potential. However, it is also possible that to some extent, some women may have actually lived to their potential except that their stories may never have been recorded. When considering what was discussed above under Ezra-Nehemiah and in 1 and 2 Chronicles, there is evidence of women with muted voices. However that has been contrasted by what was later discovered as the potential power embedded within the female other as acted out by Vashti and Esther. These two women’s tales reveal their remarkable actions of resistance to patriarchy and its oppressive measures. Their actions indicate that the female other has the potential to act autonomously and is bold enough to take risks, as long as it is for a good cause.

It is notable, that these texts represent femininity and womanhood only from an androcentric perspective. According to Fontaine, they are only a partial truth or at least the only bit the sages felt comfortable to comment on.¹²⁹ Can both the Strange Woman and Woman Wisdom be seen, at least in part, as representing ‘a type’ or other ‘types’ of women that may have existed in the Jewish society at some point even if it means women whose actual deeds escaped the writing of the sages? While this may be hard to tell as the text is obscure, such a possibility may not be completely dismissed. The two women may not be regarded as mere literary personifications that are entirely the creative imagination of the sages. Though metaphorical and idealized, we cannot rule out the possibility that both figures of woman

Wisdom and the Strange Woman may have to some extent, derived from the sages’ personal experience of women.

We will move on to analysing the roles played by the woman of Prov. 31:10-31, and how the text reflects or does not reflect other post-exilic texts examined in the preceding discussions.

5.4. A Literary Transition from 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther through Prov. 1-9 to Prov. 31:10-31: Defeating the norm

The preceding exploration of the social and cultural nature of the post-exilic era has provided some important insights into the life and status of women in the Jewish community of the time. It is worth noting that the sample evidence from the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles and Esther indicate clearly that women in that community did not have as much power at their disposal as their male counterparts.

In Ezra-Nehemiah for instance, women were treated as objects and were subjected to men’s rule. Foreign women had no say in their divorce by Jewish men who discarded them for political reasons. In 1 and 2 Chronicles women were not considered as important as men in the list of genealogies representing the generational continuity of the Jewish nation. Still in Esther there is that hostile treatment of women. Men seek to pursue their selfish interests at the expense of their female associates. Nonetheless, both Vashti and Esther display bold resistance to male dominance. The impression is that in themselves, free from male
dominance and suppression, women are capable of exercising their autonomy. Vashti and Esther’s actions reflect not only their personal acts of courageousness in the face of injustice, but could be seen as giving glimpses to the strength and courage embedded inherently within them as female persons. However this is blatantly suppressed by the dominant other, patriarchy with its male supremacy.

When it comes to Prov. 1-9, we observe a subtle difference between this text and the ones discussed earlier. There is a literary transition brought about by Prov. 1-9. The focus shifts from male dominance and supremacy to female dominance. The discourse is predominantly female talk (even though not by women but men). That is, even though the voice of the father dominates the teaching as he directly addresses his son, the subject is wholly the two female figures. Accordingly, Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman take centre place in the discourse and this is significant.

We have already observed that the personified figures of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman of Prov. 1-9, presents their prospective male companions with limited choices of either one or the other. Because these women represent two ways, that of wisdom or folly, which are equated to life and death, respectively, it means that the men’s choices are limited to these two. Consequently Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman cease to be marginal as they represent the ultimates: life which is the object of desire (wisdom) and its antithesis death which is the object of fear (folly) to be avoided entirely. Humorously it’s men who are faced with this dilemma and hence whatever choice they make they are under the power of either of the women. This is not to dispute that the son, who is the addressee in the discourse of Prov. 1-9, has the real power to choose, but that his choice which is undoubtedly of
paramount concern, is only restricted to either one of the two female figures. I see the constriction as a powerful means of control and dominance by the female others here concerned.

Furthermore the Book of Proverbs concludes on an equally captivating presentation of female dominance and supremacy entrenched in Prov. 31:10-31. This forms a comprehensible movement from Prov. 1-9. There is increasing female authority that subverts patriarchy. It is on the basis of these insights that I will argue for a literary transition between Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31. The patriarchal tradition that confined, muted, oppressed and overlooked the female/feminine other is eventually being confronted and subverted especially by the polemical presentation of Prov. 31:10-31.

At this stage I will explore the text of Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of the preceding discussions. The basic questions that the study seeks to address will include; a) Does Prov. 31:10-31 reflect or bear traces of the social and cultural traits of the post-exilic era b) does Prov. 31:10-31 uphold or disregard the norms, values and traditions characteristic of the post-exilic era with regard to the lives and status of women? c) What is the message embedded within Prov. 31:10-31 regarding the women and their status in society? Consequently answers to these questions take the study into Robbins’s social and cultural texture in relation to Prov. 31:10-31.

5.5. Proverbs 31:10-31 and Robbins’ Social and Cultural texture
It is worth noting that Prov. 31:10-31 shows considerable differences when compared to the rest of the literature from the post-exilic/Persian period, at least the ones discussed in this chapter. Nevertheless, there are, in Prov. 31:10-31, traces of the patriarchal stereotyping of the female other that we saw in the other texts. We have demonstrated that especially vv. 10-12 and 23 of this text, with the exception of the phrase לְיִשָּׁרָה (v. 10a), primarily define the Woman of Courage in terms of her worth to her lord/husband.\textsuperscript{130} Nonetheless, the poem radically breaks away from such patriarchal stereotypical definitions of woman in the following ways.

\textit{She is a Woman of Courage}

At the beginning of the poem (31:10a) the woman is described as one of ‘courage’ the term which is overloaded with power overtures.\textsuperscript{131} This description therefore immediately represents a turnaround in the way in which women were commonly viewed in that culture. As seen in the preceding discussions, the post-exilic society from which Prov. 31:10-31 was written has been shown to have a tendency to display biasness and hostility against women, usually portraying them as dependent on their male counterparts either as wife, mother, and daughters to their fathers.

The idea has been explored at length especially in the discussion of women in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther. However the book of Esther in particular, has

\textsuperscript{130} This idea has been discussed at length in Chapter 4 of this study.

\textsuperscript{131} Refer back to Chapter 2, p. 65 footnote 30. Wolters (‘Proverbs XXXI 10-31’, p. 453), summarizes the meaning of לְיִשָּׁרָה as better understood as the female counterpart of the גֶָּחֲנִים, the title given to the ‘mighty men of valour’. He acclaims that the person celebrated in this song is a ‘mighty woman of valour.’
shown some important elements and characteristics possessed by women who despite the hindrances they experienced under the patriarchal order, still persisted in their autonomous power and ability. This applies particularly to characters like Vashti and Esther.\textsuperscript{132} We have also noted how women have been portrayed in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, and how their portrayal as both at the periphery and the centre, fearful and desirable is witness to their power.

\textit{She is a Real Woman with Wisdom}

Bearing in mind all what we have seen in the presentations of women in the earlier discussions, one realises that what is encountered in Prov. 31:10-31 may be a voice that seeks to speak out for oppressed women. This time the powerful figure is a real woman who is not hidden behind a metaphor as is Woman Wisdom in earlier chapters of Proverbs. Yet it is her close affinity with Woman Wisdom that makes the Woman of Courage stand out as a liberated woman. Though Woman Wisdom possesses autonomy and is invested with so much power that transcends and undermines patriarchy, as we saw in the preceding discussions, she is weakened by her symbolic portrayal. On the contrary, the Woman of Courage, in addition to sharing similar traits as those of Woman Wisdom, surpasses the former because she is real and not merely a symbolic figure.

\textsuperscript{132} This point has been explored in detail in the discussion on Women in Esther on pp. 194-198 above.
Bryant convincingly describes the woman of Prov. 31:10-31, as a mature woman who practices the virtues taught in the rest of Proverbs.\textsuperscript{133} Her work is a demonstration of those virtues in her own cultural setting.\textsuperscript{134} This idea further sets her apart as a real flesh and blood character. In addition to possessing wisdom virtues (v. 26), she is a mother and wife (vv. 11-12, 23, 28) roles identified with human persons. While personified wisdom is described in terms suggestive of lover (Prov. 4:5-9) and mother (Prov. 8; 32ff), the roles are not directly stated as in the case of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31. This nullifies Kathleen O’Connor’s claims, as cited by Alice Ogden Bellis, that the central character of Prov. 31:10-31 is no typical woman but the Woman Wisdom herself.\textsuperscript{135} The two figures of Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage are somewhat clearly two separate female entities.

However, due to the close resemblance between the Woman of Courage and Woman Wisdom, Shulamit Valler writes the following:

The attribution of such wisdom, in addition to other virtues such as bravery and intelligence, to an eset hayil, highlights the actuality of a liberal conception of woman and womanhood among the sages.\textsuperscript{136}

Valler’s conclusion is significant. Notably, such a ‘liberal conception of woman and womanhood’\textsuperscript{137} as evident in 31:10-31 comes right at the very end of the sages writing of...

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Bryant, ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman’, pp. 3-4.
\item Bryant, ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman’, pp. 3-4.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Proverbs. Its absence from earlier chapters (Prov. 1-9), with their preoccupation with female imagery as denigrated and idealized, could be attributed to the sages’ apparent bias in favour of patriarchy. However, the acknowledging of the value of the female/feminine other by the sages could be interpreted as a sign that the power of woman/womanhood is uncontainable and will persist despite obstacles, including those of patriarchy with its oppressive measures. In the Woman of Courage, female power has reached its full potential to the point it can no longer be ignored. Amazingly, just as the lives of males revolved around female symbolisms in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs, even here the Woman of Courage stands as the centre of her household.

With that in mind therefore, the Prov. 31:10-31 poses as a radical contradiction and critique of the current norm. Thus, by declaring the Woman of Courage as someone of very high value in a society so characterized by androcentrism, the dominant culture is being challenged. This is an outright call for change not only of how women are treated but more so of the social order of the day.

The text displays deviation from the norm. Its response to the observable inequality between the sexes as indicated in the preceding discussions is counter-cultural. It is calling for a transformed set of relationships. The view is, in this case, the call to reconstruct the entire social world into a world in which women as represented by the woman of courage would begin to occupy some important place in the social ladder (see Prov. 31:31). This is in contrast to the muted voices of women in Ezra-Nehemiah.

137 These are the words of Valler, ‘Who is Eset Hayil’, p. 86.
Women were often portrayed as stereotypes and little as persons in their own right. This stance is being radically challenged by the text of Prov. 31:10-31. This is in concurrence with Waltke who, in quoting Wolters, concludes that 31:10-31 ‘functions as a polemic against the praise of women in ancient Near Eastern literatures that are preoccupied with women’s physical charm from an erotic point of view’.

The woman of courage debunks physical beauty as praise worthy (v. 30).

In the book of Esther, for instance, physical beauty was used to determine women’s value. First, Vashti was to parade her beauty for the enjoyment of the king and his group of men (Esther 1:11). When Vashti acts autonomously and refuses the king’s bidding, she gets eliminated forever from her position as queen and from any association with the king (Esther 1:19). Like the women in Ezra-Nehemiah, she has no say in her divorce and we don’t know what legal steps were taken to finalize her divorce. All we know is that she was banished forever. Likewise Esther’s beauty is emphasized as a measure for her recognition. She won the beauty contest which paved her way into the high position of queen.

Waltke convincingly sees the text as counteracting such a stereotypic view of women, in favour of a celebration and praise of a woman in the ordinary affairs of family, community

140 Refer back to p. 186.
141 Refer back to p. 189.
and business life. Prov. 31:30a sums up this polemic by stating that ‘favour is deception and beauty is nothing.’ Therefore, Prov. 31:10-31 is importantly a celebration of a real woman’s success and courage in matters of life.

My perspective is that the elevated personified female figure in the earlier chapters of Proverbs (Prov. 1-9) becomes actualized in the humanness of the Woman of Courage. What was earlier taught as an abstract idea has eventually gained substance. This has been shown to have derived from the real experience of the sage who now acknowledges and celebrates the reality of such a woman. The Woman of Courage is bursting with the incredible qualities of wisdom, as those displayed in Prov. 1-9, and yet human and realistic as a mother and wife, like those women in 1 and 2 Chronicles and in Ezra-Nehemiah. In the Woman of Courage is a synthesis of the qualities of human women and that of Woman Wisdom. This supports my argument for a literary development between the texts studied. Claudia Camp shares similar sentiments in asserting that there is a literary continuity between Prov. 1-9 and Prov. 31:10-31 in which there is a balancing of exaltation and earthiness exhibited through female figures. In other words Camp insists that it is in the Woman of Courage that the epitome of wisdom is humanly displayed (given an earthly life). This is the idea shared by the present study, which however slightly differs with Camp who still sees the Woman of Courage as an ‘idealized’ human figure.

The Woman of Courage transcends the stereotypical boundaries of both personified Wisdom as a confined figure in the patriarchal minds (idealized), as well as of a traditional mother and

144 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 190.
145 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, p. 190.
wife confined to the home and to the rule of man (as women in 1 and 2 Chronicles and those in Ezra Nehemiah). She instead breaks loose from those boundaries that try to contain her.

It is worth noting that female/feminine strength and ability, as shown in the Woman of Courage, has not received such strong appreciation anywhere else in the biblical materials from the Persian-period Israel (at least not in the texts investigated by this study). For instance, in the narrative of Esther, Vashti particularly displayed resilience and courage but was only met with antagonism. Vashti’s ability to make decisions about her life was something very unacceptable and far from being appreciated. It only led to her demise. In Prov. 31:10-31, the woman’s initiative, and strength of both mind and body, as demonstrated in her deeds, and in what is said about her speech (v. 26), becomes a reason for her appreciation. She is first being appreciated by her lord/husband and children (vv. 28-29) and then the poet ends by calling for her public appreciation by men (v. 31). This position further sets Prov. 31:10-31 as a polemic against patriarchy with its associated reluctance to acknowledge and appreciate the capabilities of the female/feminine other.

This argument brings us to the conclusion that the discourse about the Woman of Courage is here presented as a radical call for a complete makeover. It presents a rejection of the current status quo that allotted women a marginal place in society. Women in the preceding discussions of Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles and Esther held less significant positions that were monitored by their male counterparts. In Proverbs 31:10-31, there is a revolutionary teaching against such subordination of women to men’s rule.
This text (Prov. 31:10-31) provides continuity with, and yet surpasses, Prov. 1-9. Both texts provide an alternative to the view of women when compared to the previous texts from the post-exilic era. In Prov. 1-9, the difference from the rest of the post-exilic texts studied is observable in the increasing power and autonomy of the female other. While the increase in female power can be seen in Prov. 1-9, in the figures of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman, there is a limitation to this power. There is a barrier created by the idealization and personification of these otherwise strong female figures. As long as they remain in the realm of the abstract, they are confined in the sages’ imagination. Even though I have argued that the personifications are likely rooted in the sages’ experience of real women, they are still a property of the sage’s imagination since apart from such they do not exist. The boundary and limitation is however destroyed in the final section of Proverbs in the Woman of Courage. Instead the latter is the definitive example of female/feminine power and ability that surpasses that of the male/masculine other. She takes on a life of her own; she is neither confined as a personification nor by the prevalent patriarchal norms. She is not confined to the realm of the domestic as she takes her place in the public space; travels around, deals in trade and business transactions and affects the entire community by reaching out to its poor and needy.

Moreover, the final call in Prov. 31:31 further implies that people are themselves capable of bringing about the desired social re-ordering. This is equivalent to suggesting that if men/males, as the ones who apparently occupy the public place (in the gates), begin to see women in a more positively transformed manner that appreciates them and their works, then the entire social order will be re-ordered accordingly. It is significant that the place where decisions are made and entirely by men (namely, the gates), is the very place where the Woman of Courage is to be acknowledged (v. 31). This is ultimately calling for a change of
the very system that legitimates male power. The writer/sage may be seen to be advocating for a position for female recognition and empowerment at the level of public authority. Earlier in this chapter, we saw that Woman Wisdom is also found at the gates, Prov. 8: 1-3, for instance. Nonetheless, Woman Wisdom’s presence at the gates is of a lesser challenge in that she is hidden behind a metaphor. Although a strong figure, who subverts patriarchy, as I have argued before, she cannot exert as much pressure on the patriarchal order as does the Woman of Courage who is real.

The final call of Prov. 31:31 means that the change that this text is calling for, is to begin with those in power, the men in the gates. If the powerful other, in this case the males/men, could begin to endorse women’s capabilities and appreciate their positive contribution, not only to their families, but to society at large, then change could be effected. If men, especially the ones who make the decisions ‘at the gates’ could start appreciating the women under their authority, there is hope for a positive transformation of the entire social order.

For instance, in the story of Vashti (Esther 1:11-12) it would have taken King Ahasuerus to respect Vashti’s opinion against parading as a striptease. If only he treated Vashti’s resistance as having value and as representing her innermost feelings about her dignity, the king might have come to a place of understanding her as a person in her own right. The King as being in the position of authority could bring about positive change if he chose to act in appreciation and recognition of Vashti’s personal choice regarding her life. If her decision had been respected, it would have had a positive impact especially on the lives of women in that
culture. The men knew this (Esther 1:20) and could not stand it. Her ‘adverse’ decision affected the entire social order (Esther 1:20).

Prov. 31:10-31 is a radical contradiction of the oppressive patriarchal system of the post-exilic era that held women captives to the rule of men as exemplified above. We have already noted that the Woman of Courage is described as involved in almost everything from domestic chores, to local, to international trade. By placing her in the elevated position, it could be argued that the text views the present social order of the post-exilic Israelite community as corrupt and needing to be changed in order that the behaviours they sanction (that of marginalizing women) may also change.

It may be concluded therefore, that the Woman of Courage has transcended the norm and taken over a highly noticeable role as opposed to the least noticeable ones usually performed by women in the domestic sphere. Everyone is sanctioned to give her praise and interestingly this must start with the men who exercise ultimate control of the social order as implied in the statement of ‘in the gates’ (Prov. 31:31). It is important to note that even though the Woman of Courage has taken on a position of highest supremacy she yet remains human; a wife and a mother who cares for her household entirely.

It is interesting that ‘praise’ which is an appreciation of good, is here given to the Woman of Courage as stated in v. 31, suggesting that she is a success. Therefore, v. 31 is not only a

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146 Vashti’s decision was adverse because it presented a challenge and a threat to the patriarchal order of things. Her ability to say ‘no’ to the rule of men was feared by the very men as a possible paradigm for the freedom of all women who existed as subjects to their male others. This is why the verdict was sent throughout the empire summoning all women to remain under the subjective rule of their husbands.
critique of the norm but also stands as a paradigm for men too and not just women. It sanctions and summons males to endorse female potential. Men are called to appreciate what females have to offer in life rather than to shun them through oppressive patriarchal dealings.

5.6. Conclusion

The analysis of the social and cultural texture of Prov. 31:10-31 has brought to light some intriguing insights. Read against its social and cultural background the text has proven itself to be a polemic against the status quo particularly with regard to the treatment of women. Through reconstructing the social and cultural context of the post-exilic era, we have discovered that women were often sidelined when it came to important issues even those that directly affected them. For instance, in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles and Esther, women have been shown to be subjected to the rule of men so much that when they dared to question it, they suffered at the hands of the patriarchal system. Vashti has been a good example of such unfair treatment of the female other. The post-exilic patriarchal socio-cultural system suppressed women’s potential for autonomous thinking and acting.

However, as the reconstruction progressed to include the introductory chapters of the book of Proverbs, some observable literary transition came to the fore. In those sections (chapters 1-9 of Proverbs) women/female imagery and personifications were given a dominant position in the discourse as well as dominance over the male other. Both the figures of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman stood as potential rivals to the existence of patriarchy. As it has been demonstrated in the earlier discussions of this chapter, the two female figurations represent
the ultimate extremes of human existence namely, life and death. To this end therefore, men/male supremacy and dominance is brought down to choose either one of the polarities and significantly, these are both represented in female figurations. In this case if the male other does not bow to Woman Wisdom and get the reward thereof which is life, then he has to face the destruction that comes with bowing to the Strange Woman. Either way he is under the power of a female figure.

Consequently the patriarchal order has been shown to be left at a crossroad by these female figurations of Woman Wisdom and the strange Woman. However, it is not until, the Woman of Courage (Prov. 31:10-31) that the entire exercise of humbling the male other and bringing patriarchy to its knees becomes actualized. The preceding arguments in this chapter have shown that in the Woman of Courage, all boundaries of the confinement of women have been dismantled. Beyond Woman Wisdom who is confined by being an abstract being, a symbolic personification in the minds of the patriarchal order, the latter is a concrete, physical being in the freedom of real life. Consequently the Woman of Courage breaks down all boundaries set by patriarchy.

It may be safely concluded that Prov. 31:10-31 is a radical call for a paradigm shift regarding the treatment of women in the post-exilic community. It is a call for the shifting of gears from patriarchy with its associated stereotyping and marginalization of women, to a more open minded order that appreciates women in their own right as persons. Prov. 31:10-31 ends on a remarkable note that calls for a reconstruction of the gates (v. 31). The gates are to turn into a place where women can also be recognized thereby ceasing to be a male dominated and controlled space.
By demonstrating the courage, strength, and wisdom, possessed by the Woman of Courage and by letting her traverse public spaces in her business transactions, the text is a polemic against the norm. Her presentation as an autonomous woman, beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere, renders Prov. 31: 10-31 a liberating text to women in general. In the next chapter, I will expound on the patriarchal ideology of the text and how the portrayal of the Woman of Courage subverts that same ideology.
Chapter 6: Ideological Texture of Prov. 31:10-31

‘Every Theology has a Politics’¹

In order to build insight into the ideological texture of a text, it is important to analyse the spectrum of social and cultural data that the author of the text builds into the language of the text.² That is, when reading for ideological texture, one seeks to find both the interests of the author and how those interests are argued out in the text.³ The question is what and whose self-interests are being negotiated in the text and to whose benefit?

It is important to note that, having explored the other textures of Prov. 31:10-31, namely, inner, inter and socio-cultural textures, repetition of certain themes and ideas will be inevitable in this analysis. This is due to the nature of socio-rhetorical interpretation. We have already noted in chapter 1 that the textures of a text are closely related and even intertwined.⁴ However the difference lies in the emphasis and the focus of the analysis, which is based on the texture one is seeking to explore. The repetitions may also result from the nature of Prov. 31:10-31 itself. We have indicated that it is an ideologically nuanced text given that it is a woman’s compendium from a male’s perspective.⁵ Therefore some ideological aspects of this text have already been discussed in the earlier chapters especially in chapters 4 and 5.

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¹ Robbins, Sea Voyages and Beyond, p. 315.
³ Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts, p. 118; Sea Voyages and Beyond, p.315.
⁴ See Chapter 1, pp. 26-47.
⁵ See Chapter 1, pp. 1-3.
In this chapter, my aim is to pay special attention to the ideologies and ideologically inclined renderings that may hint at the ideological position of the author. I also seek to discover how those ideologies have impacted on the portrayal of the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31. Intrinsic to this endeavour therefore, is my interest to discover the construction of the female other in the text of Prov. 31:10-31 and to see how her identity is shaped and reinforced by the text and its ideology/ideologies.

The framework of womanist perspective will assist in searching for a message of liberation and empowerment of women that may be inscribed within the text. This is based on the presupposition that even though the biblical texts on and about women (like Prov. 31:10-31) were not written by women, or with women in mind, they are subtly packed with evocative messages about the female other. Such can be empowering to women today. The same could also be of paradigmatic nature to contemporary gender issues as well as informative to other forms of inequality.

The first step is to look into the possible ideological context of Prov. 31:10-31 as indicative of the ideology/ideologies held by its author. I will then venture into an ideological analysis of the text in which a systematic investigation of words, phrases and meanings will be carried out. This will hopefully expose the particular ideology/ideologies inscribed overtly/covertly within our text.

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6Bach, ‘Man’s World, Women’s Place’, p. xiii. Meyers (‘Women and the Domestic’, p. 34) too asserts that the bulk of biblical writings must be attributed to male authorship and hence their androcentric orientation. Likewise Yee (Poor Banished Children of Eve, p. 5) purports that the biblical text primarily narrates and legitimates male ideologies.
Anthony R. Ceresko argues that as it is common in male-centred scriptures, the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 is viewed from the perspective of what she provides for her husband and children.\(^7\) In the same vein Carole Fontaine asserts that this woman is wholly ‘male-identified’, i.e. viewed from the perspective of her fulfilment of roles that enable the lives of the men who depend on her.\(^8\) Sharing similar sentiments Whybray insists that this poem (Prov. 31:10-31) is viewed from the man’s point of view.\(^9\) It is more likely that it is a handbook for prospective bridegrooms.\(^10\) However, it is not in the interest of this particular study to go into issues of the intended reader/audience as raised by Whybray, but to look for the relevance of this poem to contemporary issues as already mentioned before. In a rather radical way Renita J. Weems, in deconstructing Prov. 31:10-31, has also concluded that the portrayal of the woman given in this text is a man’s construction of the female other.\(^11\)

It is significant that Prov. 31:10-31 like the rest of biblical texts\(^12\) offers us a male blueprint for femininity/femaleness/womanhood. We need to read between the lines in search of a

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\(^8\) Fontaine, *Proverbs*, p. 464.
\(^12\) Bach, ‘Introduction: Man’s World, Women’s Place’, p. xiii. Bach maintains that the difficulty in coming to conclusions about the lives of women in the ancient world is that almost all the texts about women have been written by men. We have no direct evidence of what women thought, said, or felt but only male blueprints of female behavior. Pamela J. Milne (‘Voicing Embodied Evil: Gynophobic Images of Women in Post-Exilic Biblical and Intertestamental Text’ in *Feminist Theology Vol. 30* [2002], pp. 61-69) argues that gynophobia is rooted in and draws its authority from the biblical tradition. Camp (*Wisdom and the Feminine*, p.79) also holds that the society of Israel was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrimonial which had the effect of making women second-class citizens in terms of the power they were typically authorized to wield outside of the confines of the domestic setting.
message that might resonate in our contemporary world. Words and expressions and hence the language used in the eulogy to the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 will be taken seriously in this endeavour. As suggested by Christie C. Neuger, ‘language works to create the world in which we live and we create language that describes that reality’. As further observed by Neuger, language is the means through which old meanings are either maintained or contested and through which new meanings are either constructed or resisted. By taking the language of the text of Prov. 31:10-31 seriously, I hope to gain insight into the ideological world of text. Special interest will be paid to the way the language of Prov. 31:10-31 creates and defines its subject: נָּשָׁה אִישָׁה ‘a woman of courage.’ I also hope to see how old meanings about femininity/femaleness/womanhood are either maintained or contested and how new ones are either constructed or resisted. Therefore my goal in this analysis is twofold; a) to explore how the text of Prov. 31:10-31 might seeks to maintain the status quo, namely the patriarchal ideological definition of femaleness/womanhood in its portrayal of the woman of courage and b) how the same text (Prov.31:10-31) might seek to contest or resist the very status quo if it does at all.

6.2. Does this text seek to maintain the patriarchal status quo?

We have already hinted at the patriarchal stereotyping of the female other inherent in the rhetorical question of Prov. 31:10a.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Neuger, ‘Image and Imagination,’ p. 154.
\textsuperscript{15} See Chapter, 4 pp. 141-143.
The Woman’s Subservient Status

I have argued that the question ‘who can find’ that follows immediately after the title, יָשָׁהָהּ ’a woman of courage’ introduces an ideology that sees a woman as some object that needs to be sought and found as well as some commodity/merchandise to be bought.\(^{16}\) The text advances an ideology that immediately portrays the woman as a subservient figure who has ‘to be found’ (v. 10a) as though she is lost if on her own. She is also to be bought (v. 10b) so she can be owned by the one who buys her. The portrayal immediately leads us to wonder as to who is to find and buy this woman and why. Therefore, at issue in the rhetorical question of v. 10a is the supposed ownership of the female other.

As the text unfolds, more light is shed on the prospective and presumed finder and buyer of a Woman of Courage. In v. 11 it is stated;

The heart of her lord/master/husband trusts in her and he lacks no spoil (31:11)

It seems like the woman needs to be under some male control and ownership as suggested by the language of v. 11. Fontaine renders vv. 11-12 as indicating that ‘the man who possesses the woman will lack for nothing’.\(^{17}\) She is essentially placed under the ‘possession’ and ‘lordship’ of her ‘husband’ and to provide for his needs. The narrator therefore illustrates the familiar position of women in biblical times, as under the authority of males, either their

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\(^{16}\) See pp. 141-143; Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman*, p. 78.

\(^{17}\) Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, p. 160.
fathers before they are married or their husbands after marriage.\textsuperscript{18} This feature of the Old Testament/Hebrew bible\textsuperscript{19} has been noted by Bird who contends convincingly that the Old Testament is a man’s ‘book’ in which women appear for the most part simply as adjuncts of men, significant only in the context of men’s activities.\textsuperscript{20} This perception, she argues, is fundamental as it describes the terms of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible’s speech about women.\textsuperscript{21}

Bird’s conclusion appears to be supported by Prov. 31:11 in its choice of terminology. The title \textit{'her lordship/master',}(see Prov. 12:4, 31:11a; Gen. 20:3; Exod. 21:3; Josh. 24:11, 16:8) to refer to the husband of this woman becomes of special interest. The use of \textit{'her lord/master'} instead of \textit{'man/husband'} is indicative of the patriarchal ideology of the text. It portrays the woman as of an inferior status to her husband. It carries meaning connotations of a superior to an inferior.\textsuperscript{22} It is a title that is preloaded with power overtones for its subject ‘the husband.’ On the other hand it pushes the wife to a position of denigration and powerlessness in relation to him. It is reminiscent of a relationship between a dominant figure ‘lord/master’ and a relatively subservient one and hence is indicative of the unbalanced marriage relationship being examined here. As suggested by Bird, the title suggests why the


\textsuperscript{19}Bird, \textit{Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities}, p. 1, footnote 1. Bird explains that the term Old Testament as opposed to Hebrew Bible, is specifically of Christian character and from a Christian theological perspective in which scripture is viewed on/ as a two part canon. In the Christian perception, the Old and the New Testaments are inseparably united as witness to one and the same God. On the other hand, the title Hebrew bible acknowledges the Christian character of the designation ‘Old testament’ and the denigrating supercessionist connotations it carries for some. The title ‘Hebrew bible’ is nonconfessional and designates interfaith discourse. Therefore I tend to use the terms interchangeably in my writing because to me they simply point to the same text regardless of one’s religious confession.

\textsuperscript{20} Bird, \textit{Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities}, p. 13.


\textsuperscript{22} Bird, \textit{Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities}, p. 37.
marriage relationship was used as a metaphor for the covenant relationship of Yahweh to Israel, a relationship characterized by intimacy and subordination.23

In addition to the denigrating position awarded the woman of courage in relation to her husband, she is also described as serving or servicing the needs of her lord/master/husband by the next verse;

She does him good and not evil all the days of her life (31:12)

Thus she is further pushed to the status of a servant, one who provides ‘good’ service to her superior. What this text does here (vv. 11, 12) is show us (the readers) that the woman provides her good service to the male other, her ‘lord /husband,’ without receiving any service back. Accordingly, vv. 11b and 12 impress upon the reader(s) that the Woman of Courage is both lower in status and lives her life to serve the needs of her male other. Expressing similar sentiments, Bird has observed that Prov. 31:12 shows that all the woman’s talents and energies appear to be directed towards her husband and in this role ‘she does him good’ (v. 12).24 Emphasis is on the benefits which she brings to her husband and family by her industry and reliability.25

The resulting subservient and even marginalized position of this female figure is a pointer to the gender inequality and the male bias ideology within which Prov. 31:10-31 is couched.

23 Bird, Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities, p. 37.
24 Bird, Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities, p. 31.
Thus, as noted by Hyun Chul Paul et. al., in a situation of inequality, a woman is encouraged to concentrate on the needs and development of the man.\textsuperscript{26} This is portrayed in vv. 11-12.

It is important to note that the woman of courage is already subordinated to the one who marries her and becomes her ‘lord/master’ (v. 11). Moreover by overtly stating that she is a good woman and not vice versa as evident in the words ‘she deals to him/does him good and never evil..’ (v. 12), the text further point’s to patriarchy’s stereotypical definition of femaleness which reminds the reader of the contrasting female presentations encountered in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs.\textsuperscript{27} It worth noting too that the assumption is that the woman of courage is heterosexual for her partner is male.

\textit{She ought to be a ‘good girl’ and never a ‘bad/evil’ one}

Milne notes interestingly that the book of Proverbs can be described as a man’s compendium of religious and moral instructions, some of which is about women in which two categories of women emerge: good women and bad women.\textsuperscript{28} Bach also makes reference to classical, biblical and Hellenistic texts as providing female literary figures framed within the entrenchment of the wife/wicked woman dichotomy.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} Bach, ‘Man’s World, Women’s Place,’ p. xxi. Bach holds that in the biblical stories about women, we see both good and bad, warrior and victim and that many of them are both good and bad, both warrior and victim. There is no single slot in which the characters fit.
\textsuperscript{28} Milne, ‘Voicing Embodied Evil,’ p. 63.
\textsuperscript{29} Bach, ‘Man’s World,’ Women’s Place,’ p. xviii.
Consequently what is lurking beneath the description in v.12 is the patriarchal ideology that seeks to define and regulate female behaviour. It is indirectly subverting female autonomy by suggesting, albeit snugly, that marriage is the ideal for women because through that institution their goodness/worthiness can be measured. This is determined by women’s dealings in relation to their lords/husbands. In any case, however, we cannot dismiss the idea that even a married woman could do evil to the male other as shown by the description of the adulteress in Prov. 6:20-35. The difference is that a woman who is not married becomes a type or stereotype of a dangerous woman because her goodness cannot be measured. She has no husband to/for whom her dealings of good could be identified and/qualified. Ultimately any unscrupulous behaviour will necessarily be associated with such a woman because she is not a property of a man.\textsuperscript{30} She poses a threat to the male other and to the existence of patriarchy since she is outside of its control. Ultimately entailed in the subtlety of v. 12 is the concept of marriage as an absolute ideal that every female must aspire to achieve. Hidden in the ideal is male chauvinist interests that marriage is intended to serve and has nothing to do with the fulfilment of the female other.

Klein’s conclusion that wives and mothers were not attributed sexuality\textsuperscript{31} may serve to enhance the claim that marriage was intended for the service of the male other. By virtue of being a wife (vv.11, 12, 23, 28), and mother (vv. 11, 23 and 28), the Woman of Courage’s sexuality is under male control, that of her husband.\textsuperscript{32} She is less of a threat to male power and authority when compared to an unmarried woman. In this way, the Woman of Courage

\textsuperscript{30} For a full discussion on the claim of ownership of women’s bodies by men see Gina Hens-Piazza ‘Terrorization, Sexualization, Maternalization: Women’s Bodies on Trial’ in Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex and Violence in the Bible ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) pp. 163-177.

\textsuperscript{31} Lillian R. Klein, From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), p. 5. Klein asserts that wives and mothers are not attributed sexuality; and women who are clearly enticing to males are regarded as extremely dangerous, and inherently evil.

\textsuperscript{32} Bird, Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities, p. 23.
is a woman existing within patriarchal walls and boundaries. This is what the male bias ideology of this text is trying to show in these opening lines of the poem (vv. 10-12).

Camp makes an interesting observation that may shed some light on my conclusions above. Regarding marriage as an absolute ideal to be aspired for by all women, she states:

...the young woman is allowed only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father’s home or she is a faithful, child-bearing wife in her husband’s or husband’s family’s home. The Bride is expected to make a clean transition between categories. Otherwise the social order that has created these categories is itself threatened.33

Thus, every mature woman is expected to graduate from her father’s authority to that of her husband’s under the marriage institution. If she remains unmarried, according to Camp’s conclusion above, and according to the subtle but heavily implicated message lurking beneath v. 12, she could use her sexuality to the detriment of the male other. Furthermore, as an allusion to Prov. 1-9, particularly the words ‘and never evil’, v. 12 might also carry negative implications for unmarried women. In this case an unmarried woman, who is not a virgin in her father’s house, becomes identical with the strange woman of Prov. 1-9. In a way she will be constructed and defined as an ‘evil one’ because her ‘womanhood’ (as in her sexuality) is not the property of any man.

On another level, Exum makes a slightly different observation that however may represent another implication of the effects of dichotomous presentation of women in biblical texts. She observes that the division of women into respectable and disrespectable women works to regulate female behaviour by making gender solidarity impossible. Citing Lerner, Exum further explains that ‘respectable women’ are those women who are protected by their men and disrespectable ones are those who are out in the street unprotected by men and free to sell their services.

The woman of courage of Prov. 31:10-31 may so far be classified as both a good and respectable. She is both a married woman and a mother who lives her life for the good service of her lord/husband (vv.11-12). This qualifies her as a ‘good’ one, one who is within the rules of as far as patriarchy is concerned. Yet on another level, the contrasting imagery of femaleness entailed in v. 12 could also be seen to subtly advance the patriarchal male chauvinist ideology that seeks to set boundaries between what is good and what is bad. Goodness in this scenario is equated with male gratification and vice versa. This further serves to mark the boundary of what must be defended, and this is male interests. Anything that goes against male satisfaction will necessarily be suppressed and rendered evil. In defining boundaries this way patriarchy will be able to justify its subjugation of the female other. Eventually man’s interests are protected at the expense of everybody else’s, especially women’s interests.

34 Exum, ‘Feminist Criticism,’ p. 82.
35 Exum, ‘Murder They Wrote’, p. 61.
36 Exum, ‘Feminist Criticism’, p. 82.
Gail C. Streete has also noted the binary distinction of parallel figures of feminized Wisdom, which translates into the ‘good woman,’ and feminized anti-Wisdom (Illusion, Folly), which equals the ‘evil woman,’ in the book of Proverbs. She argues that these two figures embody the positive qualities of the woman possessed by a man (Wisdom as wife) and the negative qualities of the woman incapable of being mastered by any man (folly as the adulteress). Fontaine’s conclusion about the dichotomous description of the good versus the bad woman seems apt for exposing the subtle tone of v. 12. She maintains that:

For every good wife praised for her strength and effectiveness, there is a loud, adulterous, vain, nagging woman to be found in the shadow she casts, the two together reinforcing the good girl/bad girl codifications of patriarchal musings on the nature of the female Other. Even when only one of these ‘character archetypes’ appears, her very presence invokes her absent sister, and the interpretive cycle that socializes women based on the roles assigned to them by men for the benefit of men begins.

Ultimately, women are intimidated and manipulated. They are made to feel deficient if they do not have a male representative through whom they can prove themselves good by rendering their good services. Thus Prov. 31:10-12, presents a message to its audience that says that ‘a good woman’ is one who is under the ‘lordship’ of a male other and to serve him well.

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40 Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, p. 82.
41 Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, p. 82.
The question is whether or not the text will keep the woman of courage within its parameters of patriarchal definition of femaleness/womanhood. Does the woman of Courage remain a subservient figure who is also chattel to her male partner? Does she exist for his personal gratification alone?

Once again it is important to note the language that is used for this woman to chronicle her deeds. As rightly argued by Szlos, the unusually powerful depiction in this poem (Prov. 31:10-31) has not been adequately examined. As a result of the inadequacy, there has been an oversimplification of what is a very complex character. This has led to a reading of the Woman of Courage as an exceptional house wife. However a close reading of the text reveals that she is far more than that: she is powerful in her own right.

Consequently, this study will examine the ‘power words’ used to depict the woman of courage of Prov. 31:10-31 and to see if such words reflect a powerful figure who is more than just an exceptional house wife. What sort of activities set her beyond just a mother and wife within the confines of her house?

6.3. A Self Subversive Ideology: Patriarchy at a Crossroads

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46 The phrase is borrowed from Szlos (‘A Portrait of Power,’ pp. 99-100). It is adopted for its aptness in describing/referring to the powerful terminology and words of power and strength employed in the depiction of the subject of Prov. 31:10-31; the Woman of Courage.
The use of term "courage" (vv10 and 29) to refer to a female other is striking. It is a word that is often used with men as its subject in the Hebrew bible and frequently in a military context. Elsewhere 'courage' denotes 'competent strength' (Prov. 12:4; Ps. 12:4), wealth, (2 Kings 15:20), membership in a select group (Gen. 47:6; Exod. 18:21) including a warrior class (2 Kings 24:14 and 16).

By naming the woman of Prov. 31:10-31, the poet has already set her aside as an 'empowered' woman as opposed to a 'disempowered' one. Thus from the outset, the power of the Woman of Courage has been asserted. However, there is an immediate attempt to subvert that same power by allotting the woman a subordinate position, as implied in the title given to her husband namely, 'her lord/master.

Szlos makes an important observation in noting that the term has been repeated twice i.e. Prov. 31:10 and 29. In both cases the refers to the woman because, even though in v. 29, its occurrence is not in a clause directly linked to the ‘a woman of courage’, the context indicates that this use of does describe her as well as the other women referred to here. In this verse (v. 29) the woman of courage’s courage is rated above all other women

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48 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 520.
50 Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 100.
who have also done courage.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore the Woman of Courage is undoubtedly an empowered and a powerful woman.

\textit{The Woman of Courage is Industrious}

The Woman of Courage is also depicted as a doer, a productive person, one who labours physically during her waking hours.\textsuperscript{52} This is evident in the series of verbs contained in the poem with the woman as their subject. The following discussion will pay attention to the verbs of action present throughout the poem and what implications they provide with regard to their subject; the Woman of Courage.

The action verbs in the third feminine singular throughout Prov. 31:12-27 will be underlined below;

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{She does him} good and not evil, all the days of her life (v. 12)
  \item \textbf{She seeks} wool and flax and joyfully \textbf{(she) manufactures} with her palms (v. 13)
  \item \textbf{She is like a ship going around;} \textbf{she brings} in food from afar (v. 14)
  \item And \textbf{she arises} still in the night and \textbf{(she) gives} prey to her house and \textbf{(she gives) a portion} to her maidens (v. 15)
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{51} McCreesh (‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 32) also maintains that the repetition of הָנַּח emphasizes the incomparable worth of the woman celebrated in the poem.

\textsuperscript{52} Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,’ p. 98.
She considers a field and (she) takes it; from the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard (v. 16)

She girds her loins in strength, to make her arms strong (v. 17)

She perceives that her gain is good; her lamp will not be quenched in the night (v. 18)

She sends away (stretches) her hands to the spindle-whorl, and ‘her palms grasp the whirl of the spindle (v. 19)

Her palm she spreads out to the poor and her hands she sends away (stretches) to the needy (v. 20)

She will not fear from snow to her house, because all of her house is in scarlet clothing (v21)

Coverings, she makes for herself, a garment of six purple (v. 22)

Linen garment she makes and (she) sells and belts she gives to the traders (v. 24)

And she laughs to (at) the coming day (v. 25b)

Her mouth she opens in wisdom and the law of kindness is on her tongue (v. 26)

She watches the ways of her house and (she) does not eat bread of sluggishness (v. 27)

Szlos correctly purports that some scholars might subtract or add a verb or two to the above list as interpretation plays a part in determining which are action verbs or which are not.\(^{53}\) However the main thing is that, there is no dispute about the long series of verbs of action in this poem (Prov. 31:10-31).\(^{54}\) Their existence is proof that the woman at the centre of the


\(^{54}\) Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power’, p. 99. Szlos notes that Wolters’s study (‘Proverbs,’ pp. 446-57) is the exception here because he does not discuss the literary features he discovers. She maintains that even though Wolters lists
The Woman of Courage is a woman of industry who is continually engaged in physical labours, a woman of strength and ability.\(^{55}\)

More importantly, the series of verbs in the third feminine singular are indicative of the woman’s industry. She is involved directly in physical activities, working tirelessly to meet his needs and interests as indicated in the verb; יְדֵיָהוֹ ‘she deals /does to him’ v. 12; and as implied in the previous v. 11 in which he is said to have no lack of בְּנַלְתָּה ‘spoil/booty’.\(^{56}\) By employing this war field terminology, the narrational voice affirms the ‘Woman of Courage’ as a woman in equal standing as ‘men of courage’ who are also mighty men of war (1 Kings 1:42; Judg 11:1; Ex 14:4). It also implies that the woman has to win essentials like food and clothing through strategy, timely strength, and risk.\(^{57}\) What this means is that the woman is no less physically capable of doing things that her male others can do. The idea nullifies the male perception of woman as weaker sex and hence can be read as advocating for equality.

\textit{The Woman of Courage is Free and Independent}

Some of the above verbs and other words are worth elaborating on in order to demonstrate that not only do they prove the woman of courage to be a doer but more so they act as evidence to the contradictory nature of the depiction of the woman of courage in relation to the ideology otherwise inherent in the text. The verbs significantly place the doer beyond any

\^{55} Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power’, p. 100.
\^{56} Refer back to the translation of this word, in chapter 2, pp. 65.
\^{57} BWaltke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 522.
limitations but rather portray her as a person who is free, brave, industrious, thoughtful, wise and in possession of remarkable courage and strength that is fitting to the title awarded her in this poem, namely אָֽהֶבֶתָה בַּחָלִיל.

In a majority of cases in the Hebrew bible, שֶׁפַּשְׁךְ (‘she seeks’ v. 13) is used to mean ‘inquire about’ (2 Sam 11:3; Jer. 30:14) but also may be used to refer to a ‘strayed animal’ (Deut. 22:2). Therefore, like a strayed animal, the woman of courage must ‘wander about’ in her business dealings. It is inevitable and logical to think that in ‘seeking’/ ‘inquiring’ about something, movement is implied, at least to some extent. In the context of v. 13, the woman of courage is likely to be moving about looking for the raw materials to use in her spinning industry, namely, wool and flax. It may be concluded therefore that in so doing she is not bound to her home, to the domestic realm, for otherwise she would not be described as ‘seeking/straying about.’ The conclusion is backed up by the verse that follows which compares her to ‘merchant ships that bring food from distant places’ (v. 14).

Yoder concludes that royal women or women of the court and workers brought food ‘from afar’ (v. 14) in the form of royal provisions.58 She further maintains that the statement (v. 13) means that they ordered food supplies from the royal store houses.59 My contention is that when reading vv. 13 and 14 together, and taking into consideration the verbs used; to ‘seek’, and to ‘bring,’ vv. 13 and 14 respectively, one gets the sense that the woman of courage goes out and actually moves about searching for material (wool and flax) to use in her weaving business and hence she wanders about like merchant ships (v. 14).

58 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p. 84.
59 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman, p. 84.
The Woman of Courage is Physically Strong

It is significant too that the Woman of Courage’s physical prowess is also given attention. In v. 17, root רַבָּה ‘to gird her loins in strength/works rigorously’, demonstrates the woman’s physical activity. To gird oneself is to get ready for an activity such as for war (1 Sam 17:39; 2 Kings 3:21; Ps. 45:4). Similarly Fox maintains that v. 17, ‘girds her loins…’, demonstrates physical strength by vast stamina. It can connote preparation for strenuous activity. Prov. 31:17 essentially has connotations of military readiness and this is suggestive of the woman’s intensity and tenacity in pursuit of her goals.

Szlos contends that there is nowhere else in the Hebrew bible that ‘loins’ is said to belong to a woman and hence this is another example of this woman being describe in ways usually reserved for men. She has also noted the use of words such a ר ‘might’ in v. 17a repeated also in v. 25 (Isa 2:10; Judg. 5:21, 9:51), and יָשָׁר ‘to strengthen’ in v. 17b (Deut 31:7; Gen. 25:23; Prov. 8:28, Ps 27:14). The words in addition to those noted already, add to the depiction of this woman as powerful. Furthermore the length of time she spends working as indicated in vv. 15 and 18 by the term לַיְבִי ‘night’, in addition to showing her determination

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61 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 894.
62 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 894.
64 Szlos, ‘A Portrait of Power,” p. 100.
and courage also has the implication of physical strength pointing to her indefatigable energy.\textsuperscript{65}

In like manner, Waltke asserts that v. 17 portrays the woman as having the capacity to do the required, sustained manual labour.\textsuperscript{66} Considering that she plants a vineyard (v. 16) in addition to manufacturing textiles (v. 13), Walkte’s translation is a relevant one. Importantly, the description in v. 17 gives us the picture of a physically able-bodied woman who works rigorously and ‘shows her strength through her arms.’\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{The Woman of Courage is Brave and Courageous}

The use of מֶלֶס ‘prey’ (31:15) is also worth noting. Like a brave lioness, the woman of courage hunts for her food by night.\textsuperscript{68} Waltke argues that syntactically v. 15 is subordinate to v. 14 and hence the figure of a preying lioness (v. 15) supplements the preceding figure of a trading fleet.\textsuperscript{69} Therefore in addition to her movement outside and away from the domestic sphere of house and home as implied in vv. 13, 14, the Woman of Courage is also a brave and courageous individual. She is not afraid to face challenges in supplying for the needs of her household (v. 15). At the very least, the word מֶלֶס represents provisions acquired only after the exercise of great strength, prowess and ingenuity.\textsuperscript{70} It appears to commend the

\textsuperscript{65} Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 891.
\textsuperscript{66} Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 525.
\textsuperscript{67} Clifford, Proverbs, p. 275.
\textsuperscript{68} Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 524.
\textsuperscript{69} Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 524.
\textsuperscript{70} Waltke, The Book of Proverbs, p. 524.
extraordinary ability of this woman in providing for her household against great odds. 71 The use of both לַעֲלֵי (v. 11) and לִבְנָה (v. 15) illustrates in a very dramatic way the woman’s ability to provide for those in her charge. 72

On another note, Waltke contends correctly that the preying imagery (v. 15) should not be interpreted literally. 73 The very imagery is important as it demonstrates the determination, strength, effort, courage and energy displayed by the woman. In ensuring for the welfare of her family, the woman of Courage is equal in her courage and strength, to a hunting lioness that ensures that her cubs are well fed and protected. The same argument may be raised with regard to the use of ‘courage’ in the title for this woman (Prov. 10a). 74 No wonder Wolters has suggested that the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) is a hymn to a warrior that has been adapted to praise a heroic woman. 75

It is noteworthy too, that in v. 15 the woman of courage is described as working at or in the לַעֲלֵי ‘night.’ The same word is repeated in v. 18b ‘her lamp does not go out in the לַעֲלֵי ‘night.’ This may be interpreted as further showing that the woman described here is one of great courage and determination. She is not deterred from accomplishing her goals by the limitations of time. Her activity is ceaseless day and night. 76

71 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 41.
72 McCreesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 41.
74 The translation of the Hebrew term ‘courage’ places its subject, on the same footing as mighty men of valour, wealthy and respectable men of courage and great men of war. Refer to Chapter 2, p. 65, footnote 30.
76 McCreesh, Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 43.
The use of metaphors like the ones noted above (vv. 13 and 14) that imply movement beyond the borders of home and those of warfare (v. 11), preying lioness (v. 15), are significant. They paint a picture of a woman whose behaviour does not correspond to the ideological view of women. In ancient Israelite culture women’s activities were restricted, spatially, temporally and functionally.77

*She is a Prosperous Woman*

As asserted by Clifford, a ‘burning lamp’ is a metaphor for prosperity (Prov. 13:9; 20:20; 24:20).78 The sense here expressed by Clifford is equally applicable to the Woman of Courage because she is a successful woman, in all areas of her life. For instance, as a wife, she cannot be faulted by her husband as he delights in her (vv. 11, 12, 28 and 29), nor by her children (v. 28) as they call blessed (v. 28). In her business life she has also done well and hence the poet fervently command that she should be paid her dues, the ones she has successfully laboured for (v. 31).

*She is a Righteous Woman*

On a different note, McCreeesh holds that the word ‘lamp’ (v. 18), presents a possible allusion to Prov. 13:9 which gives it a further meaning; that of righteousness.79 McCreeesh further suggests that there is a possibility that the Woman of Courage is regarded and counted

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79 McCreeesh, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 43.
among the just, working with or for the just (Prov. 13:9). The message presumed possible by McCree of reading Prov. 31:18 as noted above, still resonates (although in a subtle manner and perhaps even by allusion only) with the Woman of Courage’s depiction. In v. 26 for example, the Woman of Courage is shown to possess חסד ‘kindness’ a word which carries meaning nuances of morality and uprightness (see Neh. 13:14, Is 57:1).

Clifford makes a similar observation by his claim that ‘she does not eat bread of sluggishness/idleness’ (v. 27b), means, ‘meals that symbolize callousness and self-indulgence.’ He asserts that ‘bread of...’ is an idiom that occurs elsewhere; e.g. to be fed the ‘bread of tears’ in Ps 80:6 means to live with painful realities; the ‘bread of wickedness’, or the ‘wine of violence’ in Prov. 4:17, signifies the embracing of a violent way of life. The Woman of Courage is said to be exempt from such. By way of analogy therefore, it may be concluded safely that by ‘not eating the bread of idleness’ (v. 26b) the woman is at the very least counted among the righteous as opposed to the wicked. Moreover her uprightness is also given attention in v. 30 which counts her as ‘a woman who fears the Lord’, a point noted by Fox as the crowning virtue of this woman.

To sum up, the images portrayed in vv. 15 and 18 provide a window to both her physical and inner strength; she is brave and courageous like a lioness not intimidated by circumstances. She is not weak and vulnerable and hence transcends the stereotype that defines women in such terms. She works on into the ‘night’ in order to achieve her goals and hence she is prosperous in her dealings. She has also shown herself to possess moral virtue in that she

80 McCree, ‘Wisdom as Wife,’ p. 43.  
81 Clifford, Proverbs, p. 277.  
82 Clifford, Proverbs, p. 277.  
83 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 898.
works hard for all that she achieves and there is no craftiness involved in her successes (vv. 15 and 18). She also acts compassionately towards the less fortunate (v. 20). This is summed up in v. 30 which alludes to the woman’s ‘fear of Yahweh’.

*The Woman of Courage is a Business Woman*

Ultimately the Woman of Courage has displayed diligent attributes both in areas of domesticity (vv. 13, 14, 15 and 19) as well as in the public sphere as a savvy business woman involved in commercial dealings and transactions (vv. 14, 18, 24). That is, contrary to the stereotype of mother and wife acting within the constraints of house and home, the woman here described has considerable independence. She interacts with outsiders as she conducts her business and she even buys and owns real estate.

Prov. 31:10-31 gives us a portrait of a woman who has money to invest. Her management extends beyond the house to the management of her lands (v. 16), to dealings in the market where she is a shrewd seller (vv. 11, 18, 24) and buyer (vv. 13, 14). As outlined by Waltke, vv. 16-18 escalates the woman’s economic base and her table fare to the purchase of a field

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84 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman*, pp. 81-85. Yoder makes reference to the commercial background of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31). She notes the use of particular words as indicative of such a background for instance, the repeated use of the term *רָכָּם* (vv. 14 and 18), the word *מְלֵקֶה* which also has connotations of selling and trading is also repeated twice in vv. 10 and 24 as well as reference to lax and linen which were products imported from Egypt to Palestine. Camp (‘Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor’, p. 55) equally maintains that the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 performs labours necessary for the maintenance and *shalom* of her household. She goes forth into the world to deliberate on investments and engage in commerce. Lyons (‘A Note on Proverbs 31:10-31,’ p. 238) likewise explains that this woman provided food, clothing, security and engaged in commerce and bought property.


where she plants a vineyard.\textsuperscript{87} In v. 16, she plans and makes strategies to buy a piece of land in which to plant and because the activity requires great strength, she prepares herself in v. 17. Thus she has the needed physical aptitude. In v. 18 we are told of her source of psychic and spiritual energies.\textsuperscript{88} She ה看見 ‘perceives/tastes’ means that she has learnt from experience and evaluation (cf. Prov. 11:22; 26:16) that the רווח ‘gain/profit’ from her trading (cf. Prov. 3:14) is good/desirable and valuable (cf. Prov. 3:27; 11:23).\textsuperscript{89}

\textit{Conclusion}

The attributes of the Woman of Courage demonstrated in the preceding discussions, subvert any patriarchal definition of a woman. Her activities have been shown to place her outside of the authority and representation of any male representative. Even though she is a married woman, she is not acting under the legal subordination of women within the family.\textsuperscript{90} Her business endeavours take her well outside of her home. It is her initiative and she lives up to it. This further puts her beyond the patriarchal subordination of women in which a woman’s primary work was family-centred reproductive roles as wife and mother.\textsuperscript{91}

Therefore, when reading vv. 10-12 together with the rest of the poem, there is evidence that the text ultimately sabotages its own ideology. It initially tries to define this woman in ways that both uphold and support patriarchy with its desire to subordinate the female other. As the

\textsuperscript{87} Waltke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 525.  
\textsuperscript{88} Waltke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, pp. 525-526.  
\textsuperscript{89} Waltke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 526.  
\textsuperscript{90} Bird, ‘The Place of Women’, p. 6.  
\textsuperscript{91} Bird, ‘The Place of Women’, p. 6.
poem progresses the description of the woman tends to be less stereotypical and more affirming of the woman’s capabilities.

According to the patriarchal ideology of the text, the Woman of Courage must necessarily remain, at least to an extent, under some male association and identity. She must at least be a wife. She however, is not an equal to her husband but an inferior in status as implied in vv. 10-12. In this way she does not risk being a threat to the patriarchal system since she is within its boundaries. Even though she is a woman so autonomous, full of initiative, thoughtful, and of strong courage, as demonstrated by her deeds, the patriarchal ideology behind this poem tries to undermine that. This leads to a contradiction which significantly reveals the patriarchal desire to have women as objects men can own and exercise control over. The powerful words that are used in describing the Woman of Courage (as illustrated throughout this essay) including the word נפל ‘courage’, give evidence to the failure of patriarchy in that regard.

Her actions are exclusively independent and she does not show any deference to male control. To the contrary she is the one who has the lead even over her lord/ husband for she is the bread winner for her entire household. Through her character and deeds she has transcended the boundaries of mother, wife and home and treads the public space as a property owner and business person. Therefore, she renders the text of Prov. 31:10-31 a self-subversive ideology and a polemic. It could also be interpreted as a corrective to the patriarchal stereotyping of the female other.
But there is more to be said. The next discussion will focus on the last section of the poem i.e. vv. 28-31. The aim is to see how the text concludes its tribute to the Woman of Courage.

6.4. An Appraisal of Female Power: Setting a Paradigm Shift

In the concluding section of this acrostic poem there is explicit recognition, appraisal and acknowledgement of the Woman of Courage. She is exalted and appreciated (vv. 28-31) and better still, a command is issued in her favour (v. 31). The verses are important as they point to a paradigm shift in the poem.

Her sons arise and call her blessed, her lord; and he praises her (v. 28)

Many daughters have done courage (courageously) but you ascend above all of them (v. 29)

Favour is deception and beauty is nothing; a woman (who) (has) fear of Yahweh she shall be praised (v. 30)

Give to her from the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her at the gates (v. 31)

It is interesting to observe that the appraisal given to the Woman of courage is specifically by the male figures; her sons and her lord/husband (vv. 28, 29). One may ask why it is just her sons and her lord/husband who ‘rise up’ (v. 28) to praise her and not ‘her entire household’
which would include the men (husband and sons) and her maid servants (vv. 15, 21) as well as any other unnamed/unmentioned members of that household, if any. The specific reference to ‘her sons’ as well as ‘her lord’ as the ones paying tribute to her is pointing to the fundamentally transformative message of this poem. It can be argued that at this stage, the poet seeks to specifically, albeit more subtly and indirectly, address those who have been the culprits in not appreciating the woman. The mood and the focus of the poem change. Throughout, the Woman of Courage has been at the centre of action; doing everything for everyone. From v. 28, the tables turn, she is still at the center but this time as the recipient and not the giver. She is the focus of praise by the very others she has served throughout the poem, the ones toward whom all her energies have been directed.  

In v. 28, the boundaries of gender inequality have been weakened by ‘the rising up’ of the male others (her sons and her lord), to appreciate the woman after all she has done. The appraisal which stems from the recognition of this woman’s capabilities, strengths and achievements is continued in v. 29. Scholars agree that in this verse, the woman is acknowledged as one who excels even the most talented women. Of interest here is that she is being directly addressed as the recipient of the praise especially by her male others. It is proof that the beneficiaries have come to terms with the reality that good and kind deeds must be appreciated regardless of the doer’s gender. In the words of Edgar Jones, the husband has learned to love his wife and keep telling her that he does. In so doing the husband is

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92 Waltke, The Book Of Proverbs, p 533. Waltke holds that the introduction and the body of this poem emphasize the blessings the woman bestows on her husband (vv. 11-12, 20, 23), and her household (vv. 15, 21), but that the conclusion emphasizes the reciprocal good they do to her. McCreech (‘Wisdom as Wife’, p. 36) observes that the woman so concerned for others now becomes the central concern and praise of others.

93 Clifford, Proverbs, p. 533.

breaking the boundary that has seen the woman’s deeds of courage and kindness taken for granted and left unappreciated.

Scholars agree that v. 30 is advocating character as opposed to beauty in a woman. Character is more essential and long lasting while the latter is deception for it is temporary.\textsuperscript{95} It is an indication that ‘beauty passes away and with it passes the hope of happiness based on it’.\textsuperscript{96} This is further strengthening the call for a transformed set of beliefs, norms and definitions of femininity that associated a woman’s value with her looks. Such perceptions of womanhood translate the value of a woman into something temporary so that if a woman’s beauty fades so does her worth. This is not to say that beauty is bad or should not be appreciated. There is a difference between valuing women by their looks (which is what is condemned here) and valuing looks.\textsuperscript{97} Good looks are appreciated in both women and men (cf. 1Kings 20:3; Prov. 5:19; Esth. 2:7b; Gen 39:6b; 1 Sam 16:18a).\textsuperscript{98} The poem concludes on a strong note that further points to its paradigmatic as well polemic nature.

6.5. Taking Patriarchy by the Horn

Give to her of the fruits of her hands and Let her works praise her at the gates (v. 31)

\textsuperscript{95}Walke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, pp. 535-536. See also Jones, \textit{Proverbs and Ecclesiastes}, p. 247. Fox (\textit{Proverbs 10-31}, p. 898) argues that this is a moralistic (not feminist) warning against valuing women according to their looks. See also comments by Hurowitz (‘The Woman of Valor and A Woman Large of Head: Matchmaking in the Ancient Near East’ in \textit{Seeking out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honour Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday} [Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005], pp. 221-234).

\textsuperscript{96}Walke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, p. 535.

\textsuperscript{97}Fox, \textit{Proverbs 10-31}, p. 898.

\textsuperscript{98}Fox, \textit{Proverbs 10-31}, p. 898.
The language of this v. 31, like the rest of the poem, appears to be powerfully and richly nuanced and needs to be unpacked. The question that comes to mind is ‘why does the poet choose to use an imperative/command, יִתְנַהֲלוּיָה ‘you give’ (v. 31:a) and the jussive meaning entailed in the form of the piel verb, יִתְנַהֲלוּיָה ‘let them praise her.’ Walke suggests convincingly that this variation, in which the voice changes from the imperative of direct and personal address ‘you’ (v. 31a), to the jussive of indirect and impersonal address ‘let them’ (v. 31b), shows that the addressees of v. 31a are the responsible citizens in the gates (v. 31b). 99

Who are the responsible citizens in the gates and why is it important that they be addressed in the specific manner in which they are being addressed? We noted earlier that the שְׁכֶם ‘gates’ in ancient Israel was a place where much of public life took place. 100 It was the place where legal matters were negotiated (cf. Gen. 23:10, 43:20, Ruth 4:1), and where the council of elders met for political discussions (Prov. 31:23; Lam 5:14; Ezek. 11:1f). Lang, observes that male adults were the usual scene at the gates as they had full rights as citizens who also formed the political community (cf. Gen. 23:10, 18; Prov. 5:14; 26:26). 101 The public life of the gates and square, in the Middle East to this day, is public only for men and women are excluded from such. 102


100 Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs*, p. 24, and 26. McKane (*Proverbs*, p. 669) also purports that the gates of the town are the places of assembly where deliberations of public moments take place, where legal and political matters are settled. Waltke (*The Book of Proverbs*, p. 530) equally asserts that the phrase ‘in the gates’ (cf. Prov. 1:21; Job 29) symbolizes the city’s collective authority and power.


Therefore in v. 31 the poet directs attention and call to the specifically male audience at the gates. The addressees are being ordered to ‘give to the woman from the fruits of her hands’ (v. 31a). Embedded in the imperative is the desired obligation that the poet seeks to impress heavily on the addressees. The influential men of the community, the ones invested with power and authority under the patriarchal system, are instructed to give to the woman what is deservedly hers for she has worked for it as implied in, ‘from the fruits of her hand’ (31a). The imperative further suggests that although she has been the source of all good things, and despite having worked hard as itemized throughout the poem, she may not automatically have shared in the profits of her own labour.  

From the preceding discussion, we will recall that in vv. 28 and 29 the poem is specific about the ones giving tribute to our heroine; the Woman of Courage. It is the exclusively male figures from her household (her sons and her lord/ husband). In v. 31, which is the climax, not only of this poem but, of the entire book of Proverbs, the addressees are especially singled out as the ones ‘in the gates,’ which is again exclusively male as women were excluded from participation there. In a nutshell, it is the male others, the ones invested with power and authority by the patriarchal system (the elders and leaders, the sons and husbands), who must shift gears in order to do justice, recognize, appreciate and acknowledge the woman other.

It is the fundamentally powerful male others, הַשָּׁפֵר ‘the elders’ at the gates (v. 23) who are being told to go beyond recognizing, appreciating and acknowledging the Woman of

104 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 899. He advances similar sentiments that the poet is speaking to the male readers, urging them to render to such a woman ‘of the fruits of her hands.’
Courage; they are to share the public space of the gates with her as implied in the declaration ‘and let her deeds praise her at the gates’ (v. 31b). After all she has earned it while they are there because they are males. Verse 23 is evidence to this claim because it shows that even though ‘her lord’ has done virtually nothing that we know or that is recorded in this poem, he nevertheless ‘takes his seat among the elders in the gates’. 106 While the male others do not work to obtain their position at the gates, which in addition to being a place of authority, is also a place of recognition and respect, the woman has laboured for it and hence has created her own reputation that must find her a place of public prestige at the gates (v. 31).

It is important to note that the development of the poem from an overtly patriarchal ideology (vv. 10-12) that turns into a self-subversive ideology (vv. 13-27) now concludes in a polemic and a paradigm shift. At the heart of v. 31, is the message that directly challenges the status quo. Patriarchal male authoritarianism that is both suppressive and oppressive to the female other is being radically sabotaged.

6.6. Conclusion

In my ideological reading of Prov. 31:10-31, I have attempted to show that this text is couched, like most, if not all biblical texts, within a patriarchal ideological landscape of ancient Israel. Women were treated as objects for men’s use and to serve men’s interests.

106 Fox, Proverbs 10-31, p. 913. Fox rightfully asserts that the husband is truly the spectator here, the fifth wheel of the cart, an admirer.
This is how the start of the eulogy to the Woman of Courage has been set up (Prov. 31:10-12). However, in the unfolding of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31), it has become clear that the poet fails to confine his subject, the Woman of Courage, within the patriarchal walls. In attempting to define this woman as a belonging/chattel that has been bought for a price (v. 10), and for the pleasures of her lord/master (vv. 11-12, 23), the poet ends up subverting that same ideology in many ways.

By virtue of allotting this supposed subservient and subordinate figure a rather powerful title as ‘a woman of courage,’ there is already an indication that the subject of Prov. 31:10-31, is a complex female figure. She is not just a wife and mother in the traditional ancient Israelite sense of the word. As argued throughout the chapter, the term ‘courage’ is nuanced with power overtures for its subject. It renders the woman here to be of a powerful and empowered calibre that immediately places her above the marginal position otherwise intended for her by the patriarchal ideology of the text. There appears to be dilemma: there is no escaping the patriarchal expectation of who a woman should be (marginal and powerless) in relation to a man; and there is also no escaping of who the Woman of Courage is-a non-marginal but powerful figure.

The title has been shown to correspond to and be consistent with the rest of the body of the poem (vv. 13-27). The woman’s splendid deeds have been itemized as fitting the woman of courage. The initial self-subversive ideology entailed in the power-packed title of the poem, against the subservient portrayal that immediately follows it (vv. 10-12) finds continuity and gains full expression in the multifaceted works of courage performed by the woman. Thus in my view, the Woman of Courage overpowers the very system, namely patriarchy, that has
birthed and perhaps even raised her. Although she still acts within its grounds as a mother and wife, she however redefines it. She is a public figure who moves about in business trading (vv. 13, 14, 18a, 24), helping the community’s poor and needy (v. 20), a property owner and manager who buys and owns land (v. 16a), a blue collar worker who labours day and night (vv. 15, 16b, 17, 18, 19) and a non-corrupt, righteous person who works hard for what she has (vv. 26, 27).

Ultimately we are left with a female portrait of ‘masculine’ power. The portrayal has particular implications with regard to gender inequality, and by extension to all forms of inequality especially in our contemporary world. However the implications of this particular study as a whole will be treated in chapter 7 as part of the conclusions.
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications

The central question behind this study was the portrayal of the female figure at the centre of Prov. 31: 10-31. I was especially intrigued by the title לֶהָדְרוּת. I have attempted to show that it is less stereotypical and more affirming of the female other than it is often the case in biblical literature. It was discovered that despite the amount of scholarly attention paid to the text there has been a tendency to oversimplify the rather complex figure here described. Many translations, interpretations and readings, tend to leave certain nuances of the portrayal of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 unresolved. These include the translation of the לֶהָדְרוּת as anything else but a ‘woman of courage’ a translation which .

In chapter 1, we examined the history of interpretation of Prov. 31:10-31 from the nineteenth century to date. The review of past scholarship on our text has revealed at least four distinct trends that have emerged as a result of the wealth of interpretation it has attracted.

One strand of the interpretation tends to define the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 in terms of her value to her husband. This particular strand pays most attention to the patriarchal definition of a woman in terms of her wifely roles. For example, Bridges insists that Prov. 31:10-31 is a description of a wife, mistress and mother who rules in the sphere within (the home) while her husband rules in that one ‘without’ (the public).\(^1\) Crawford adds that the poem is a

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\(^1\) See p. 5.
‘Golden ABC of a perfect wife who not only manages her house but delights in living for her husband.²

Such interpretations are deficient as they tend to limit the woman to the confines of the private sphere of home as both a mother and wife. Her participation in the public sphere is not recognized. As a result the phrase לְוַיִּדָּה has received such translations as ‘a virtuous wife’, a ‘good/capable wife’ and ‘an ideal/excellent wife’.³ The translations and interpretations in this category are problematic. They tend to ignore the deeds of the woman of our text that do not comply or conform to the patriarchal status quo. Crook even challenged the notion that the Woman of Courage might have been able to buy land arguing that the land must have belonged to her husband.⁴ However, the study has revealed that the Woman of Courage is much more than a wife, mother and mistress of the house. In chapters 4, 5 and 6 we have shown that the woman here described is an independent, industrious woman who deals in business; buying and selling, owning and managing land and property. These ideas will be summarized more later, in this chapter when looking at the findings from each chapter.

Another trend of interpretation tends to define the subject of Prov. 31:10-31, לְוַיִּדָּה, as an extension of the symbolic figure of Woman Wisdom in Prov. 1-9. Accordingly, some of the scholars in this category posit that the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 cannot be a representation of any human woman. They keep her in the realm of the symbolic as a personification of God’s wisdom. For instance, McCreesh insists that the similarities between the woman here

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² See pp. 5-6.
³ See pp. 5-9.
⁴ See p. 7.
described in Prov. 31:10-31 and Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9 points to the book of Proverbs’ masterful portrait of wisdom. In Prov. 31:10-31 the marriageable maiden of Prov. 1-9 (who is wisdom personified), is now settled down as a faithful wife and skilled mistress of the household. Camp too argues that based on the close juxtaposition of the two female figures of Woman Wisdom and the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 it should be concluded that the latter is wisdom/Woman Wisdom settled down and preparing a meal in her house. She has now graduated from crying out in the streets enticing her lovers to come to her house as she does in Prov. 1-9. These views see the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 as the extension of personified wisdom. Fontaine summarizes this when she asserts that the ‘strong woman’ (as she calls the woman of Prov. 31:10-31) balances and explicates the imagery of Woman Wisdom. However, this is not an either or situation in every case. For instance, even though Yoder considers the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 to be an extension of personified wisdom in Prov. 1-9, she also argued that both are based, in no small way, on real women.

Contrary to the preceding trend that sees the Woman of Courage as personified wisdom based on the parallels between her portrayal and that of Woman Wisdom in Prov. 1-9, the study has shown that the two are in fact different. In chapter 4 we carried out an intertextual study in which the Woman of Courage was read in the light of Ruth, Prov. 12:4 and Woman Wisdom of Prov. 1-9. While echoing Woman Wisdom, the Woman of Courage inclines more to the concrete human woman much like Ruth her predecessor. While Woman Wisdom is in search of the uninstructed foolish young man, the Woman of Courage addresses her family’s physical needs and even reaches out to the physical concrete needs of the poor and the needy.

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5 See pp. 10-12.
6 See p. 11.-12.
7 See pp. 14-16.
8 See pp. 127-169.
This woman surpasses Woman Wisdom in that hers is a realized life as she benefits her husband and entire household in ways that Woman Wisdom only promises but does not achieve concretely. This however is not to undermine the idea that the acquisition of wisdom or knowledge would certainly impact on the concrete needs of people such as health, well-being, long-life, prosperity and so on. The search for wisdom therefore equals a holistic quest for survival and well-being. Nevertheless, the point I am making here is that in the case of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31, unlike in that of personified wisdom of Prov. 1-9, the acquisition of wisdom and all that comes with it has been realized in concrete life. In that way, the latter woman transcends her contemporary who is still searching to influence the concrete life of her audience (the young man) through his intellect.

Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the Woman of Courage must be a real woman or at least a representative of such. This is in concurrence with the studies of such scholars as Yoder who insists from her socioeconomic reading of our text that the woman of substance (as she translates the subject of Prov. 31:10-31) is reminiscent of the Persian-period Israelite women especially the royal class ones. Wealthy women of high ranks were property owners and were valued for their socio-economic benefits. Masenya similarly holds that read from a womanist/womanhood perspective aimed at the liberation of African, and specifically Northern Sotho women, the portrayal of Prov. 31:10-31 relates the practical qualities of a human woman.

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9 See pp. 17-19.
10 See pp. 15-17.
The tendency to identify the Woman of Courage with the symbolic figure of wisdom is closely related to yet another trend that sees her as an idealized and composite figure. The claim is that there was never any such a woman as described in Prov. 31:10-31 and there will never be one.\(^{11}\) The trends reduce the Woman of Courage to a literary figure who only existed in the creative minds of the sages. The same reasons as those already advanced against the interpretation of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 as personified wisdom will suffice here. I will therefore, not repeat them.

In recent years interpretations have tended towards reading in and for specific contexts. The text is read to address particular contemporary issues like those of the liberation of women and HIV and AIDS. Here we are thinking of scholars such as Masenya and Chitando respectively.\(^{12}\) Their readings are both reader-oriented and contextual. The female portrait is read in the light of pertinent issues in the context of the reader so as to find its relevance and its implications. Read from a womanist/womanhood perspective aimed at the liberation of especially Northern Sotho women, the text of Prov. 31:10-31 is seen to be empowering. Masenya maintains that, being household managers, women may be content in realising that it gives them control especially over their children whom they also nurture.\(^{13}\) She condemns the lopsidedness of the portrayal especially its emphasis on the service the woman gives to her husband and argues that it has been used for the subordination of women in many cases.\(^{14}\)

\(^{11}\) See p. 23.
\(^{12}\) Refer back to pp. 15-17 and 19-21.
\(^{13}\) See p. 16.
\(^{14}\) See p. 17.
Reading from and for the context of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe, Chitando advances the message that, being a good wife (as he translate the הָאָדָם הַיֹּם of Prov. 31:10-31) means actively getting informed about the pandemic and being proactive about one’s vulnerability and risk of the infection. He critiques the poem, Prov. 31:10-31, for projecting an image of a self-sacrificing woman who brings honour to her husband. His argument is that in the dire conditions of the HIV and AIDS such a stance needs to be challenged. He tellingly proclaims that in Zimbabwe a good wife is one who serves her husband well and is faithful to him but that husbands have not reciprocated. Instead husbands are promiscuous and risk infecting their wives with the deadly HIV. Under such circumstances a good wife must be one who challenges corruption and oppressive measures; demanding accountability.  

However Masenya and Chitando both fail to appreciate the all-rounded, autonomous and well empowered female power implicated in the title הָאָדָם הַיֹּם ‘a woman of courage’. While their readings are irrefutably informative to the specific contexts for which they are being read, they nonetheless fail to acknowledge the rather unusual, less stereotypical portrait of a woman entailed in the title הָאָדָם הַיֹּם. Masenya’s reading especially obscures the fact that the woman here described is not just a household manager but actually goes out in her business endeavours, engaging in trade and humanitarian business outside the domestic sphere.

In chapter 2 I mapped out my social location indicating that I will be reading from a perspective that is reader oriented and ideological and hence reminiscent of that of Masenya and Chitando. In a way, by clearly acknowledging my interpersonal stance as per my social location, I have allowed myself and the reader the opportunity to enter my intimate world of

15 See pp. 19-21.
experiences that in many ways, both covert and overt, have shaped my interpretation of the text. This became particularly discernible in chapter 6 as we shall see in the discussions below.

My approach to the text was built on these more recent readings. The hermeneutic from which I have approached the text, namely, the womanist socio-rhetorical interpretation offered me the opportunity to investigate the text from different angles. It has been shown to have thus allowed for a further exploration of the text that proved to be a necessary and constructive step in a long conversation.

The socio-rhetorical method outlined in detail in chapter 1 of this study, capitalizes on appreciating that texts are thickly textured. For that reason, when approached from only one point of view, there is the risk of getting a rather limited view of what could be a very complex and richly nuanced text. The method also appreciates that texts are products of their authors. It advocates that there is no text that is ideologically neutral. Readers too bring their personal ideological agendas to the reading process. In the final analysis texts are complex and their meanings are not readily available. To deconstruct the complexity in search of the possible meanings that a text might have, socio-rhetorical analysis works from different viewpoints so that the text is analysed for its different textures; inner texture, inter texture, socio-cultural texture and ideological texture. I will briefly summarize the findings of each chapter in what follows.

\[16\] See pp. 35-50
Chapter 2 of this study, Preliminary Considerations, explored the social location and hence the personal context of the present researcher (myself). This is deemed important given that readers are susceptible to the influences of their contexts and life experiences. Therefore in this chapter I have outlined my social location so that I could appreciate those things in my life that are likely to leave their traces in my reading and interpretation of the text. The idea was to build awareness of such factors so that they could be used as filters in the reading process. Moreover, by so delineating factors of my social location, I was hoping to give the readers an awareness that may be helpful in orienting them so that they are better informed of the possible issues that may have shaped my analysis of the text.

I have indicated that I am a Motswana woman who is an academic trained in the field of Hebrew and Old Testament studies. I am also a divorced woman who has had an experience of being married in a patriarchal culture that has little regard for the rights of women. I am a mother of three children, studying in Australia, living with my children in a country with a different culture, away from the familiar culture and life style. The everyday support for my household (my three children and I) is my sole responsibility in addition to studying for a PhD. All these factors and others not only empower and disempower me at different levels, but have also shaped my reading and analysis of the text. Enhanced by the womanist framework, factors of my social location have been used as reading lenses in my analysis of the text.

The chapter also covered the issues of the dating of the text and the translation of Prov. 31:10-31. Despite the controversies surrounding the dating of biblical texts, the thing to which our text was also seen to be subject, there is strong support for the post-exilic Persian-
period as the approximate dating for Prov. 31:10-31. This in turn guided the rest of the analysis.

The translation of the text also helped in our understanding of words, phrases and the language of the text as a whole, from my womanist point of view. This also makes it easier to understand how the language of Prov. 31:10-31 was understood and how meanings arising from the translation impacted on the general analysis of the text. As a result, the analysis has led to certain conclusions and not others. My departure in reading Prov. 31:10-31 was the translation of the phrase נסיך נא as ‘a woman of courage’. Previous studies, as argued in the preceding discussions, failed to appreciate that the term נא ‘courage’ is pertinent to our understanding of the subject of Prov. 31:10-31. Conversely, I have shown that the word is packed with powerful nuances that place the woman it describes beyond the patriarchal stereotyping of women as wives, mothers and mistresses. This too guided the rest of the translation and the analysis. As observed throughout the study, the translation has shed new insights into our text and has implications for the empowerment of women especially, Black, African women who as the studies of Masenya and Chitando reveal continue to be suppressed by oppressive patriarchal structures.\(^\text{17}\)

In chapter 3, Inner texture, the focus was on the language of the text. The endeavour amounted to an exploration of the literary and rhetorical structures of the text. It was observed that any strategies of investigation from the repetition of words to the argumentative strategies employed in the text make up the inner texture of the text. We started the analysis by first exploring how our text was previously analysed for literary structure. There has been

\(^{17}\) Refer back to chapter 1 of this study, pp. 16-22.
a lack of consensus regarding this issue. Some scholars argue that Prov. 31:10-31 has a disjointed and haphazard structure while others argue for a neatly ordered structure. Those who supported a somewhat neat structure for our poem including, Wolters whose structure is rigidly tied to that of a hymn and Garret who argues for a chiastic structure that places the husband at the centre of the portrait, have been shown to have loopholes. At the other extreme are those who fail to see any sort of structure at all, concluding that the poem is all randomly structured and sketchy. Toy, McKane and Whybray blamed the acrostic format as a factor that has led to what they saw as a jagged nature of the poem. Both groups of scholars seem to fail to appreciate the complex and yet artistically unified nature of our text.

Prov. 31:10-31 is neither disjointed nor neatly arranged. It is instead skilfully and artistically structured so that themes interlock and intersect with each other so as to achieve a climax. The poem revolves around the Woman of Courage, her good deeds to her master/husband, her entire household and the community’s less fortunate poor and needy. The poem provides a detailed account of the woman’s entrepreneurship as one engaged in trading, buying and selling, a property and land owner who works very hard. All these themes were seen to be intertwined giving the poem its thickly structured and rich inner texture. This led us to further investigate the poem in order to appreciate the different lexical threads that were perceived to combine to give it its thickly built inner texture.

We explored the text’s rhetorical/argumentative strategies. These are repetition/parallelism, *inclusios*, *transitios* and chiasmus. Through repetition of key words and themes, through

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18 See pp. 77-92.
19 See p. 77, footnote 2.
inclusions and transitiōs, as well as chiasm, it was perceived that discernible themes had been developed, contrasts had been made and emphasis achieved. When we acknowledge that our poem is built on the webs of complex interlocking and intersecting key words and themes, through the rhetorical strategies listed in the preceding lines, the organization and division of its literary structure becomes more comprehensible.\(^\text{20}\)

Chapter 4, Inter texture, a sample of texts believed to be earlier, or nearly concurrent with Prov. 31:10-31, were brought together into dialogue with our text. The texts selected for the dialogical purpose of this chapter are the books of Ruth, and Prov. 1-9 and 12:4. The choice was based on these texts’ close juxtaposition with Prov. 31:10-31 in terms of their subject matter especially as female narratives. It was noted that scholars had reiterated that the phrase פֶּרֶת appears only in three places in the entire Hebrew bible namely, Ruth 3:11, Prov. 31:10-31 and 12:4. For this reason, we explored these three texts by way of reading the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of the other two women of courage, namely, Ruth and the woman of courage of Prov. 12:4. On the other hand, Prov. 1-9 was selected based on the similarities between Woman Wisdom in these chapters and the Woman of Courage in our text.

Reading Prov. 31:10-31 in the light of the other texts mentioned above, brought new insights and understanding of our subject, the Woman of Courage. The portrayal of the Woman of Courage echoes that of the character of Ruth in the book of Ruth. However, the depiction of the Woman of Courage was proven to reconfigure that of Ruth and to transcend it. It emerged

\(^{20}\) See pp. 88-92.
that both women are first portrayed in somewhat stereotypical ways that allot them a subservient place in relation to their male others.

The analysis indicated that Ruth is portrayed in stereotypical ways as a widow whose widowhood placed her in a predicament. Her status is of a vulnerable, helpless woman without male protection and representation. Ruth was further described as a foreign woman throughout the narrative. The emphasis on her foreign Moabite ethnicity serves to further place her in a position of marginality. In fact, she is even portrayed as a seductress as stereotypically characteristic of Moabite women in relation to Israelite men. However, because her seductive ways are for the good of her male others, she gets away with it. Ruth’s major aim is securing her husband’s name. She also becomes useful to Boaz, who is shown to feel lucky that he was seduced by Ruth. Consequently, Ruth displays her courage through and by conforming to the patriarchal status quo; a system that defines and values women in terms of their services to their male others. Ruth is regarded highly because her deeds are geared towards, and highly driven by, her desire to secure the name of her deceased husband as was the custom at the time. Consequently, Ruth's courageous actions of hard work, kindness and loyalty to Naomi, her mother-in-law, commitment to family, are all displayed through her conformity to the patriarchal culture within which she exists.

Likewise, the description of the Woman of Courage’s depiction as both a commodity to be found and bought by a man, and to serve him well, were seen to be demeaning and stereotypical. Her husband is described as ‘her lord’. The title signifies the lopsidedness of the gender relationship that subdues the woman to the lordship of her male other. The same observation was made with regard to the short saying about a woman of courage of Prov.
12:4. She too is valued predominantly for her service to her lording husband as one who serves him well.

The intertextual analysis between Ruth, Prov. 12:4 and 31:10-31 demonstrated that the latter, not only echoes the other two but significantly reconfigures and surpasses them. Contrary to Ruth the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31, displays her deeds of courage autonomously. This discovery also proves to differ from the readings that we saw earlier of Bridges, Toy and others that emphasize the stereotypical view of the woman of Prov. 31:10-31 as a wife, mother and mistress of the house. The Woman of Courage is not propelled by a predicament like Ruth whose widowhood and foreign background more or less dictate her actions. Still over and above the short saying of Prov. 12:4, which only gives us a summary of the patriarchal stereotypical description of a good woman, Prov. 31:10-31 exploits the description לַעֲרֳבָּה further. This was eventually proven to be sabotage to the dominant patriarchal ideology behind the female portrayals of biblical texts, especially the ones considered here.

Further dialogical exploration of our text, now in the light of Woman Wisdom of 1-9, proved the Woman of Courage to be an empowered character. Although the ideological patriarchal spirit of the biblical material in general, continues to course unabated in the two female figures’ portrayals, generally, it was observed that both are less stereotypical. The two are described as selfless benefactors for their male associates, first as precious jewels to be acquired at a price and second, as securing the future of primarily the men in their lives. However, they are also described in more empowering ways as autonomous women who move freely. We saw that both Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Courage navigate the
otherwise male dominated and controlled space of the gates. Both women are engaged in business deals that take them beyond the domestic sphere. They also reach out to their communities to benefit people other than their families, particularly, the poor and needy. Still it emerged that the Woman of Courage surpasses Woman Wisdom because she brings to life what is merely pledged by Woman Wisdom. She is perceived to be a living epitome of Woman Wisdom who only exists as a literary icon in the minds of the sages writing the book of Proverbs. She, by no means, is equated to Woman Wisdom because hers is seen to be a concrete life whereas Woman Wisdom’s is seen to belong to some abstract existence, trying to influence the thinking of the young man. These findings differ from the trend of interpretation that we saw earlier that sees the Woman of Courage as personified wisdom.

In chapter 5, Socio-cultural texture, the starting point was a reconstruction of the socio-cultural life of the Persian-period Israel. It was noted that reconstructing the lives of women in ancient Israel is particularly made difficult by their being male compendiums of female characters/stories. Nevertheless, a few books regarded as approximately contemporaneous with Prov. 31:10-31 were explored in an effort to get insight into the socio-cultural world of the post-exilic/ Persian-period Israel. For that purpose, we explored the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther and Prov. 1-9. This time the portrayal of both female characters of Prov. 1-9, namely, Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman were investigated (unlike in chapter 4, where we only focussed on Woman Wisdom). Information gathered from these books was used to determine in what ways and to what extent the text of Prov. 31:10-31 shares similarities and differences to the cultural world of its time and to what effect.
In the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther women are suppressed and oppressed. Women are either ignored and their efforts taken for granted or reduced to objects in the hands of and at the mercy of their male others. We saw that in I and 2 Chronicles women are not recognized nor acknowledged as equal contributors in the building and existence of the nation of Israel. This is witnessed by the absence of women in the records of genealogies except for the few who were either mothers to important sons, or wives of important men. In such cases the women are only mentioned as adjuncts. Similarly in Ezra-Nehemiah, women have no say even when decisions directly affect them. The most disturbing ordeal is that of the divorce of foreign women who were married to Israelites men. Nothing is said about any possibility that some foreign men would have been married to Israelite women in which they too would have had to be divorced. The justification is that Israel needed to be purged and cleansed of evil which was associated with hybrid marriages and families. It is the biasness of the ordeal to the detriment of women (primarily foreign women) that I found problematic.

In the book of Esther, stories of two women work to further expose the patriarchal nature of the socio-cultural world of the Persian-period Israel. Vashti is disposed of for her assertiveness. We observed that it is Vashti’s courage to say no to the abuse by her master/husband, king Xerxes that led to her ultimate punishment by banishment from the palace and from being queen. Esther, on the other hand, is shown to conform, although not entirely, to the patriarchal cultural expectations. She manages her way into the palace by doing what Vashti refused to do. She parades her beauty before men and sexually satisfies the king. However, Esther later sabotages the very system to which she initially conformed. Although she uses manipulation to get her way, it is indisputable that her courage within a risky and dangerous patriarchal system is commendable.
We then moved onto the depictions of Woman Wisdom and her evil twin, the Strange Woman of Prov. 1-9. By portraying the woman other in two extremes as both good and bad, wise and foolish, life and death, patriarchy is at a crossroads. The female figurines are seen to represent both the centre and the periphery. That being the case, we concluded that the women are an essential part of men’s existence. The male other, was proven to be limited to either choosing the way of Woman Wisdom, which was shown to be the way of life or that of the Strange Woman, which would lead to death. Consequently woman possesses such power that proves threatening to the male other and to the existence of patriarchy. It was further observed that the dichotomous presentation of the female was a sign of the fear that entangles patriarchy with regard to the female other.

The investigation showed that there is observable literary transition through the books examined. That is, in 1 and 2 Chron. and in Ezra-Nehemiah women are suffocated by male power and control. They are not shown to object to or resist the extremely suppressive and abusive male power that dictated the course of their lives. As the investigation progressed to the book Esther, it was observed that the women in this narrative, although under extreme male supremacy, exhibit resilience and courage. Both Vashti and Esther have proved to be strong powers for the men to reckon with. Vashti overtly resists injustice while Esther uses cunning means as her strategy for resistance. Still as the investigation progressed, we realized that in Prov. 1-9, the opposing portrayals of female figurines as Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman, prove to be a subversion and sabotage of patriarchy, exposing its fear of the female other. Furthermore, it is a caution that the feminine has power over all males.
The Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31 was shown to demolish all patriarchal boundaries. She is a woman of manly-courage and therefore an equal to the male other. She is also a woman endowed with wisdom. The Woman of Courage is a demonstration of a powerful and wise woman. She, like Woman Wisdom who is life itself, directly undermines male power through her positive traits while the Strange Woman indirectly and yet wickedly subverts male power as death itself, which they must avoid. We further saw that our subject is not a stereotype. Prov. 31:10-31 is a celebration of a real woman for her courage and successes in the real and hard core matters of life. The conclusion is that the portrayal presents a radical call for change. It is a challenge to the status quo, a challenge to patriarchy itself. When read against its socio-cultural context, of the post-exilic Persian period, represented by the selected sample texts of 1 and 2 Chron., Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther and Prov. 1-9; Prov. 31:10-31 has proven to be a polemic against the existing norm.

Chapter 6, Ideological texture is the culmination and climax to the study. The entry point for this chapter was the investigation into the possible ideological texture of Prov. 31:10-31. It is an ideologically nuanced text. The portrayal of the Woman of Courage is from a male chauvinist perspective. This has in turn left traces on the depiction of our subject and heroine, the Woman of Courage of Prov. 31:10-31.

First and foremost the woman of courage is portrayed in ways supportive to the status quo. At the start of the portrayal, there is a contradiction in the picture given of our subject. She is described as an אֱלֹהִי, a title that is, including in the previous chapters, especially chapters 4 and 5, less stereotypical. However, it emerged that the description is immediately sabotaged by the subservient description that follows. She is depicted as merchandise to be bought by a
male who is to be her owner and mainly for his service. The woman is further stereotypically described in a contrasting manner so that her shadow as a good woman carries with it that of an evil woman.

However, the portrayal of the Woman of Courage presents a self-subversive ideology that undermines and sabotages its own precepts. By taking the language of our text seriously, we discovered that in addition to the powerful description of the subject of Prov. 31:10-31, namely יִשָּׁרַיָּהוּ, the portrayal is characterized by power words that further subvert the stereotypical picture observed at the beginning of the poem. The entire terminology used in the description of our subject was explored using the bifocal lens of the feminist/womanist reader, myself. This contributed to the discovery that the Woman of Courage is described in very strong and powerful terminology that places her in the same footing as men. Some of the strong and heavily implicated words used in the description of our subject include war-like terminology such as לְכָלָה ‘spoil/booty’ (v. 11); יִשָּׁרַיָּהוּ ‘prey’ (v. 15). Such were indicated to display in dramatic ways the courage and bravery of the Woman of Courage. Our subject is a woman of physical strength; she is not weak and vulnerable as women were stereotypically alleged in that culture. Her description as one who יָשָׁרַיָּהוּ ‘girds’ her loins, coupled with other power words such as כ ‘might’ and מָזָּה ‘to strengthen’ (v. 17) were shown to be witness to our claim.

The investigation also showed that Prov. 31:10-31 sets a paradigm shift by its appraisal of female power (vv. 28-29 and 31 and by implication v. 30). It is especially important that the praise is given by males, her sons and her master/husband. Of interest too was that the
addressees of the Hebrew verb יְנַפֵּל v. 31 (which is the qal imperative masculine plural) that calls for a change of gears are also males. This is perceived to be implied in the term שְׁנַרְיָה ‘gates’. The gates are normally a male-dominated and controlled space. By so calling for the Woman of Courage’s deeds to be allowed to praise her at the gates, it is not an exaggeration to conclude that first, the men at the gates are being held responsible for the gender imbalance regarding this place of prestige and public recognition, the gates. Secondly, it is concluded that the call of v. 31 presents not only a polemic and a challenge to the status quo that valued men more than women, but also a paradigm shift. Its central message poses a threat to patriarchy and presents a challenge to its oppressive structures.

The Implications of the Study

Some fundamental insights that may prove to be of importance for contemporary issues have emerged from our study of Prov. 31:10-31 from a feminist/womanist socio-rhetorical interpretation. It is observable and doubtless that the woman at the heart of our text is not just a ‘good, virtuous, excellent, capable wife’, she is a woman of courage. The methodology, with its emphasis on the importance of the language of the text, the ideologies of the author and the reader, enabled us to translate the phrase גְּנוֹת נַרְיָה as ‘a woman of courage’. This rendering further assisted us to appreciate the power loaded portrait of the female other here described.

This study is another contribution to the wealth of scholarship on Prov. 31:10-31 by adding to the implications of having a Woman of Courage, a rare description for women in the
patriarchal culture of the text. The picture of the woman described here speaks to all women, especially those who find themselves suffocating under oppressive patriarchal structures. Because the woman transcends the stereotypical definition of womanhood in a patriarchal culture, she is a model for all women to aspire to be. Although existing within a predominately male centred culture of the Persian-period Israel, the woman has displayed resilience and courage that eventually saw her surpass the system. In like manner, women who live in suppressive cultures that have little or no regard for female autonomy could draw insights from this character to tackle their predicaments.

The Woman of Courage has demonstrated that the power of patriarchy can be subverted and overpowered by female courage and all that comes with it, namely, industriousness, bravery, fearlessness, assertiveness and wisdom. One needs to work within the very system that tries to suppress them, like the Woman of Courage. She is initially portrayed as a subservient other, living selflessly and loyally under the lordship of her master husband and for his well-being. Nonetheless, due to her courage, she breaks out of the subservience and attains her autonomy. She bursts out of the domestic walls by her industry in which she produces surplus to give to the community’s poor and needy. Through the work of her hands she enters the business world as one trading; buying and selling and making profit. In the end, the very system that tried to push her to a marginal position is left with no other choice but to appraise her for her courageous deeds.

The portrait also speaks to all men. It cautions them to the power of the female other and shows them that women are not weak and vulnerable. By describing the woman as being ofutherford ‘courage’, the depiction that has been shown to be masculine, the text is witness to the
claim that it is a caution to men to reconsider their definition and treatment of women. It is a way of saying that women and men are equally gifted. Therefore it is a call for the male others to start appreciating the female others. It is a call for equality between the sexes. This is nuanced in the final word of this text ‘give to her from the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her at the gates’ (Prov. 31:31).

To sum up, my reading and approach to the text provided yet other ways (as many as the textures explored) of looking at the text. It has added to the already existing myriad readings and interpretations of Prov. 31:10-31. It seems fair to say that just as the womanist socio-rhetorical method has shown us, there is no limit to the way the text may be interpreted. My reading therefore, is simply an addition of a point of view in a long conversation and cannot claim to be exhaustive.
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