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Delilah's conduct in Judges 16: A Critical Fabulation

By

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Abstract

This study explores Delilah's character in Judges 16 through feminist and postmodern perspectives, using critical fabulations to reinterpret traditional narratives. The primary objective is to contest conventional views of Delilah as merely a femme fatale, broadening the analysis to consider her as a metaphor for folly and the intricate dynamics of power, gender, and cultural identity within the biblical text. By applying postmodern hermeneutics and feminist critique, the research deconstructs patriarchal power structures, particularly highlighting how Delilah's foreignness and gender have been manipulated in the narrative. Using critical fabulations, the study reconstructs Delilah's character to reveal new insights into her motivations, agency, and socio-cultural significance. The findings indicate that Delilah symbolises male fears of cultural infiltration and the vulnerability of Israelite identity, while also exposing Samson's weaknesses and leadership failures. Instead of portraying Delilah solely as a traitor, the research underscores her role in emphasising themes of folly and wisdom central to Proverbs and other wisdom literature. The study argues that Delilah's narrative challenges binary gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Through speculative history, it opens new pathways for understanding marginalised female voices in biblical literature.

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

According to Lerner (1986:139), in the class hierarchy of patriarchal society, men are given status according to their roles or their father's status in social settings; this could be mostly figured out by what they (men) wear and their place of residence. However, in the context of gender and social class, distinctions among women are often predicted upon their association with or detachment from male protectors, as well as their sexual behaviours. Historically, women have been categorized into two primary classes: 'respectable women' are women who depend on male guardianship and protection, and 'disreputable women' who lack such protection and engage in commercial sex work. This division has served as a fundamental framework for understanding gender-based class stratification among women. Moreover, drawing from literary feminist theory, Exum (2016:47) argues that biblical narratives often portray women as incomplete characters through the fragmentation of their stories. This fragmentation results in narrative gaps, which readers tend to interpret based on established conventions and preconceived notions. Exum further suggests that patriarchal ideology constructs women's roles in a manner that aligns with its own interests.

This study will focus on examining the character of Delilah, who is often portrayed as the quintessential femme fatale and embodies both charm and danger. Her captivating charm conceals a treacherous intent. As a cultural icon, her significance rivals that of two other biblical characters: Jezebel, whose reputation as a shameless woman is underserved, and Judas, whose name evokes betrayal for monetary gain. These three characters share a complex interplay of desire, fascination, and treachery. Biblical scholars often depict Delilah as a temptress who skilfully employs feminine wiles to seduce Samson into defeat by the Philistine lords (Exum 1996:176).

This study will use critical fabulations to explore the possibility that Delilah could be the antithesis of personified wisdom and can be compared with the foreign women

and/or adulteress(es) in Proverbs. This study will compare the portrayal of Delilah to the portrayal of the foreign woman or adulteress(es) in Proverbs to see if it is in sync with the portrayal of the foreign woman in wisdom literature and that she might not have been a historical figure, but a metaphor for foolishness interwoven into the narrative of Samson to warn the people against the influence of foreign culture and religions. Moreover, while the study examines the character of Delilah in Judges 16, it is important to note that the story of Samson and Delilah is often read as an admonitory narrative about the dangers of lust and betrayal. Samson is depicted as a powerful yet flawed hero who is undone by his attraction to the treacherous Delilah. This interpretation, however, ignores the possibility of Delilah being the personification of Lady Folly.

Overall, this study argues that critical fabulation can offer new insights into the character of Delilah and challenge traditional interpretations of her role in Judges 16, by comparing her portrayal with the foreign woman or adulteress in Proverbs to offer a more nuanced understanding of this narrative. The stories of women in the Hebrew Bible have had a significant impact on how women perceive themselves and how men perceive women. In the 19th century, women who spoke in public, which was considered inappropriate, were often called “disobedient Eves” or “Jezebels” (Bellis 2007:3).

1.1.1 Postmodernism

Irrespective of the underlying philosophy of history, Perdue (2005:239) argues that the established dominance of historical paradigms, whether positivism, neo-Marxism, or feminism, faces fundamental epistemological and linguistic challenges from newer paradigms. These emergent paradigms, including structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, present an elusive and multifaceted term with an array of connotations. A central aspect of comprehending postmodernism lies in its epistemological implications. Additionally, Kočí (2014:219) highlights two distinct postmodern approaches: reception history and reader-response criticism for interpreting texts. These approaches exhibit nuanced differences, closely

intertwined in their application to scriptural interpretation: (a) its role of time and (b) the role of tradition in analysis. Kočí (2014:220) notes that Reader-Response Criticism adopts a synchronic approach, focusing on the final form of the text without delving into its developmental history. In contrast, reception history employs both synchronic and diachronic approaches, examining the text's evolution from its ultimate formation to the present day.

In the historical sense, frameworks are formed that put the source of understanding within the relation of the interpreter's mind, location, networks of identities, and expressions of the linguistic culture of the text. Furthermore, postmodernism is an attempt to deconstruct the meaning-structure of the text and anticipate things differently (Perdue 2005:240)

1.1.2 Feminist Perspective

According to Perdue (2005:103), in the context of various political, social, and religious domains, an extensive historical trajectory of feminism has unfolded across centuries. Furthermore, amidst the diversity of feminist perspectives, there exist shared causes that bind advocates together. Rather than being confined solely to an ideological framework or methodological approach, feminism can be more aptly characterized as a consciousness that emerges from the interplay of environmental context, personal experiences, and gender identity. Bellis (2007:3) argues that Biblical stories of women still have a significant impact on how women perceive themselves and how the world perceives them, even in the 21st century. Unfortunately, much of this influence is negative, as female biblical characters such as Eve, Jezebel, and Delilah are often associated with seduction and evilness. However, new readings of these stories have liberated both men and women. Both genders are disturbed when they hear about the more atrocious stories of female victimisation, but they are excited when they hear some of the more feminist stories, especially if they have not been exposed to such readings before. Stories have been used against women in the past, but they can also provide tools to use in the struggle for wholeness and dignity.

Fentress-Williams & Knowles (2018:137) argue that one might think that the writings of the Hebrew Bible depict women negatively and stereotypically. The different types of texts, such as narratives, prayers, love songs, and genealogies show women as oppressed, restricted to the domestic sphere, or simply overlooked. This view of women in the writings has some truth to it. The texts are mostly anonymous, but they have male authors and readers. Moreover, they mirror their ancient social and economic situation, where land is passed on to the eldest son, wives join their husbands' families, and daughters are often excluded from the family history. They also express their ancient religious beliefs in the representation of God mostly in masculine roles of ruler, judge, and fighter.

Smith (1999:95) suggests that feminist scholars mostly face a dilemma when dealing with the biblical character of Delilah. They can either overlook her, focus on more positively interpretable biblical women, highlight her positive aspects, or confront and try to justify her negative characteristics. Some feminists find it easier to disregard Delilah, but this is not due to laziness or incompetence. It is connected to the objectives of feminist biblical studies. There is an argument that efforts might be more effectively used on reinterpreting other passages that could be more beneficial to women, especially those in religious groups.

According to Mokoena (2022:1), gender-specific theories are used to identify male bias in biblical texts and develop a unique methodology for interpreting women's experiences. The approach humanises women through non-traditional storytelling methods, rather than merely viewing them as products of their circumstances. The process entails engaging in recovery and revisionist readings, integral components of diverse interpretative and analytical methodologies. These methods, whether literary, social, or historical, aim to liberate and revive women, their stories, and experiences from constraints of editorial and ideological criticism as well as traditional theological constructs that contribute to their erasure. Cinematic oral narratives of women's stories, experiences and their ways of being either ancient and/or modern should not be regarded as purely coincidental.

1.1.3 Critical Fabulations

According to Hamer (2020), the term “critical fabulations” was introduced by a well-known American author Saidiya Hartman, which denotes a method of writing that blends factual research with creative elements to recover and amplify suppressed voices in the narratives of history. This concept was first presented in Hartman’s essay titled “Venus in two Acts” which focuses on dissecting and shedding light on the representation of the enslaved African woman. It was crafted as an answer to the historical invisibility of Black Women in literature, recognising that their stories are seldom told by themselves but by those who subjugated them. By her own initiative, Hartman sought to articulate the silenced experiences of countless women who have been historically overlooked.

Mokoena (2022:1) contends that these narratives are comprehensive, viewed through the perspective of ‘othering’. This is analysed through the lens of what Magubane describes as ‘social relations’ rather than merely ‘psychological depositions. These factors influence the perception and understanding of women’s bodies beyond their mere use as rhetorical tools. Rachel Silverbloom (2024:109) refers to the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995),¹ who emphasised that every historical narrative is made feasible by a certain “bundle of silences.” She asks how one may break those silences to present history in a different way. And how rethinking who qualifies as a historical and political agent – who can be both the subjects and the creators of history – can also contribute to undermining dominant historical discourses. To rethink or reimagine a history that has not been told, one needs critical fabulations.

Scholars such as Klein (1993:24) point out that in the book of Judges, some of the most unforgettable females make an appearance, and numerous have individually

¹ Literary critics, historians, and political scientists addressing nations worldwide were among the students in the humanities and social sciences who found value in Trouillot’s views. Despite his remarkable capacity for thought, Trouillot eventually created a central theme for his body of work, which served as the foundation for his study. It could be insightfully framed as an “anthropology of the West.”

been subject to scrutiny. However, an overall perspective on these characters' range and function has never been addressed. Delilah, for instance, has become an emblem of a mature, seductive woman. Although she is not explicitly identified as a prostitute, it is evident that she is a woman who is available outside of marriage, skilfully using her sexual allure to extract the secret of Samson's strength from him. Interestingly, this reverses the typical male-female dynamic, where women are seen acting through men (Klein 1993:28). This is clearly illustrated in how the Philistine lords use Delilah, who complies with the patriarchal rule, to accomplish what men are 'unable' to execute. However, Delilah's resourcefulness is showcased through her persistent manipulation of Samson. Her betrayal of the man who loves her for a reward paints Delilah as lacking in ethics and morality, a stark contrast to Achsah, the daughter of Caleb in Judges 1:12-15 (Klein 1993:28).

Looking at the context of Judges 16, an exploration of power dynamics, agency, and gender roles emerges within the biblical narrative. Delilah's portrayal as a seductive temptress assigned to betray Samson potentially reinforces traditional patriarchal perspectives on women.

1.1.4 Foreign Women in the Old Testament and Proverbs

Contemporary feminist hermeneutics and modern Bible studies have witnessed ongoing shifts in theoretical discourse and methodological approaches (Perdue 2005:104). Perdue (2005:104) contends that feminist literary critics have actively explored the nature of language, recognising its immense creative influence where the act of naming, shapes one's understanding of the world. Consequently, the translation of the Bible becomes a pivotal consideration in comprehending the potency of language.

Baumann (2014:57) explores the personification of Wisdom in three Old Testament texts: Proverbs 1-9, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), and the Wisdom of Solomon. In these writings, Wisdom is depicted as a person capable of speech and action, with the term "wisdom" being feminine in both Hebrew and Greek. This feminine

personification, often referred to as “Lady Wisdom,” contrasts with the traditionally masculine portrayal of God. Baumann suggests that this feminine depiction serves to balance the earlier, male-dominated image of the divine by incorporating the missing feminine aspect, thereby enriching the theological narrative and providing a more holistic representation of the divine. Baumann (2014:58) further examines the diverse social and literary contexts in which Wisdom appears, highlighting it as one of the Bible’s most intriguing literary creations, particularly concerning the feminine image of God. She notes that Wisdom is not personified in Job 28 and Baruch 3:9-4:4, where it is presented as an impersonal entity. This distinction underscores the unique literary and theological significance of Wisdom’s personification in other biblical texts, which contributes to the broader discourse on the feminine aspects of the divine. Geysler-Fouché (2016:2) indicates that the depictions of women are present throughout all wisdom literature and are examined in studies focusing on personified wisdom as well as its opposite, such as wickedness or folly.

According to Fontaine (2002:12), the stereotypical portrayals of women in the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, such as good wives, devoted mothers, and various negative archetypes like wicked prostitutes and adulteresses, are frequently discussed by the sages believed to have composed or compiled the book of Proverbs. Fontaine (2002:12) further questions whether the lived experiences of real women influenced the wisdom traditions, including the literary forms, pragmatic content, and theological speculations of Proverbs, or if these texts solely reflect a male perspective on women’s wisdom. Exum (2016:4) contends that educating young men to internalise and willingly uphold societal values is a more effective method of ensuring adherence to patriarchal norms than relying on legal enforcement and fear of punishment. The book of Proverbs exemplifies this educational approach by using the authoritative voice of a father advising his son, highlighting the benefits of wisdom and the perils of wickedness and folly. A key element of this rhetorical strategy is the juxtaposition of personified Wisdom, a legitimate and patriarchally sanctioned object of desire, against the *ishah zarah* (strange woman), who embodies the illicit and dangerous allure of the foreign,

wanton, and adulterous woman. This contrast serves to reinforce patriarchal values by steering young men towards wisdom and away from folly.

Looking at similar portrayals in Judges 16, Lackowski (2019:197-198) delves into the complex and mysterious character of Delilah from the Hebrew Scriptures, highlighting the numerous ambiguities and unresolved questions about her identity and motives. Delilah's fleeting yet significant role in the narrative prompts inquiries into her true background, the meaning of her name, and her relationship with Samson. The text points out the importance of the valley of Sorek and Delilah's involvement in Samson's capture, questioning her loyalties and intentions.

Despite these textual uncertainties, Lackowski (2019:198) observes that interpretations of Delilah have remained notably uniform across various artistic and media representations, consistently depicting her as a treacherous seductress who betrays Samson. This uniformity in interpretation reflects the persistent influence of traditional narratives and the difficulty of reinterpreting complex characters within established cultural contexts. In the space of feminist interpretations, Delilah's portrayal in the story has been a subject of scrutiny (Smith 1997:46). Traditionally, she has been labelled as a temptress, seducer, or liar. Undoubtedly, Delilah leverages her sexual allure to manipulate Samson and achieve her objectives. However, nuanced perspectives emerge in response to the characterisation.

1.1.5 Related Studies on Judges

Numerous studies on the Book of Judges provide valuable insights and complement this research. One such study is by Esther Brownsmith, titled *Call Me By Your Name: Critical Fabulation and the Woman of Judges 19*, which offers a unique perspective on the narratives in Judges 19. The study by Brownsmith connects to this research as both works explore the complex dynamics of power and gender in the biblical narratives. Brownsmith (1998:8) employs critical fabulation as an approach to grapple with a yearning that underlies efforts to name and understand certain narratives. When examining the woman in the biblical narrative of Judges 19, Brownsmith suggests that their stories become a space for

imaginative engagement and a challenge to the limitations imposed by archival gaps. In addition to Brownsmith's argument, Blyth (2017:57) contends that Delilah's name often confuses biblical interpreters regarding its significance. The same cannot be said for their response to another ambiguity surrounding her character in Judges 16 – her sexuality. While it is commonly assumed that Delilah and Samson were involved in a sexual relationship, a closer examination of the narrative reveals that the text remains elusive on the matter. Delilah's sexual status and the nature of her relationship with Samson are never explicitly spelt out.

Of the different studies made on the book of Judges, Doniwen Pietersen's articles titled '*A dangerous and powerful woman?*' – *A feminist reading of an old story with new cultural eyes* explores the narrative in Judges 14 which centres around the life of the purportedly 'hypermasculine' Israelite character, Samson, reveals a nuanced perspective. A meticulous feminist and socio-historical analysis of Samson's character unveils a grim portrayal of an anti-hero. This interpretation stems from his actions, which starkly contrast the idealised Israelite masculinity. By subjecting the text to rigorous scrutiny through a post-modernist perspective, specifically the hermeneutic of suspicion, and employing feminist deconstruction of power dynamics, it becomes evident that women are not the treacherous characters they may initially seem.

1.2 Research Problem

As this research will explore the possibility that Delilah was not a treacherous lover but the stereotypical foreign woman who was a metaphor for folly, it will look at other texts which are acknowledged for using this concept, especially Proverbs 1-9. This study will also analyse how the story of Samson and Delilah challenges or reinforces the gender roles and stereotypes in the biblical narrative and in modern interpretation.

The research question is: "Can Delilah be seen as the stereotypical foreign woman who was a metaphor for folly?"

1.3 Reason for Research

In Judges 16, the narrative of Delilah emerges as a distinctive and intricately portrayed representation of the foreign woman. It diverges from prevailing assumptions of female submissiveness and male superiority commonly found in patriarchal texts. To give a new perspective on Delilah's portrayal and actions it is necessary to apply critical fabulation on how these texts might be interpreted. This study will challenge conventional notions and compel a re-evaluation of her role as a metaphor for folly. In my perspective, this narrative presents a counter-perspective that reveals Samson's weakness. The antithesis of folly is wisdom. In Proverbs, wisdom is repeatedly linked to "fear of Yahweh", and the antithesis of that might be associated with not obeying Yahweh's commands.²

In exploring the story of Delilah from a critical standpoint, one practical approach is the application of the concept of critical fabulations. This method integrates historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative (Rosner 2018:7). By adopting this approach, this study aims to unveil the multifaceted layers of interpretation embedded in the text.

The study is exclusively dedicated to the interpretation of the text, focusing on probing the questions surrounding the suppression of women in biblical narratives and examining their lives and voices in relation to potential suppression. Exum (2007:67) notes that women, as portrayed in these texts, often appear compelled to act or speak against their own interests. Consequently, this study delves into the concealed gender assumptions within the text, such as the perception that women lead men astray or are inherently untrustworthy.

This study holds the promise of offering deeper insights into how women are marginalised or silenced within the biblical text. Scholars such as Rosner (2018:7) have utilised critical fabulations as a valuable method for unpacking complex

² See Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 26-27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 28:14; 31:30.

narratives, and this research aligns with their efforts to apply interdisciplinary approaches to biblical studies.

1.4 Methodology

This research is a literary study with a comparative approach. The portrayal of Delilah in Judges 16 will be compared with the other portrayals of foreign women especially in Proverbs 1-9. A feminist perspective will be applied. The concepts of postmodern philosophies, which developed into feminist criticism with a specific focus on critical fabulations, will be the major approach of this study.

Feminism, according to Bellis (2007:6), is a historical movement with diverse interpretations. It is hard to find a single definition that all feminists would agree on; instead, multiple perspectives are required. However, feminism can be understood as a worldview that recognises women as full human beings who deserve equal rights and opportunities. Women are not inferior or subordinate to men in any way. Most feminists acknowledge that there are differences between men and women. Some of these differences are biological, such as reproductive functions and brain development influenced by hormones. Moreover, culture has shaped different experiences for women and men. These factors may contribute to different ways of thinking and seeing the world.

This study questions the authority and legitimacy of Samson as a divinely appointed judge who is supposed to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. It also challenges the patriarchal and ethnocentric norms that govern the representation of women and foreigners in the biblical text, by giving Delilah's portrayal a purpose.

By utilising critical fabulations, this study explores the possibility that Delilah was a stereotypical foreign woman as a metaphor for folly and the antithesis of wisdom.

1.5 Research Aim

This study aims to examine Delilah's portrayal as a metaphor for folly and the antithesis of wisdom, while also revealing the weakness of Samson as a ruler and judge.

1.6 Objectives

In pursuit of the said aim, the objectives of this dissertation will be:

1. The research process will encompass various elements, including formulating the research question, selecting the methodology, specifying aims and objectives, conducting a literature review, developing a hypothesis, and organising chapters.
2. I will delve more into the methodological approaches used, specifically focusing on different reading strategies. This is to provide an overview of how these concepts evolved within literary theories and explain their interpretation and application in the study. The concepts explored include postmodern philosophies, which later intersect with feminist criticism, with a specific emphasis on critical fabulations.
3. An examination of the background of the book of Judges.
4. To compare Delilah's portrayal with the portrayal of the foreign woman or adulteress in Proverbs.
5. To analyse the text through the lens of critical fabulations, with an attempt to discover if Delilah might be the stereotypical foreign woman as a metaphor for folly and the antithesis of wisdom.
6. Concluding remarks.

1.7 Hypothesis

By applying reading methods from postmodern scholars with a focus on feminism and especially critical fabulations, it might be possible to get another image of Delilah as the stereotypical foreign woman, a metaphor for folly and the antithesis of wisdom.

1.8 Preliminary Division of Chapters

This research paper is going to consist of five chapters. In these five chapters, each chapter will aim at explaining and building up to the aim of the research.

1.8.1. Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

It will focus on the research process entailing the several elements that will be discussed throughout the research. These elements include the formulation of the research question, the selection of the methodology, the specification of the aims and objectives, the literature review, the development of the hypothesis, and the organisation of chapters.

1.8.2. Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will centre itself on the methodological approaches of this study. This chapter will focus on the different reading strategies that are applied, and it will involve an overview of how these concepts developed in literary theories. It will explain how they are interpreted and applied in this study. The concepts are postmodern philosophies which developed into feminist criticism with a specific focus on critical fabulations.

1.8.3. Chapter 3: Background of the Book of Judges

The third chapter will discuss the background of the Book of Judges. This chapter will focus on the socio-historical background of the book but also the background in general which includes aspects like the dating of the book.

1.8.4. Chapter 4: Foreign Women and Adulteresses

This chapter will have a short overview of foreign women in the Old Testament and a focused view on the foreign woman and adulteress in Proverbs 1-9.

1.8.5. Chapter 5: Delilah in Judges 16: A critical fabulation

The fifth chapter will be a reading of Delilah in Judges 16 as a foreign woman with sapiential nuances through critical fabulations.

1.8.6. Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusion

In the last chapter, the findings of the study will be given with concluding remarks as well as options for further research.

1.9 Orthography and Terminologies

1.9.1 Orthography

The Harvard referencing style is used in this research. The abbreviations of books of the Bible will be listed as recommended by NTSSA English.

1.9.2 Terminologies

1. Feminist/Feminism – In this research, I will employ these terms as a critical framework for comprehending and examining power dynamics within the book of Judges and the narrative found in Judges 16. By highlighting the gendered aspects of power and its intersections with various forms of oppression, feminist scholars have significantly enhanced our understanding of power dynamics. Furthermore, feminist researchers apply feminist theories, concepts, and methodologies to unveil and analyse existing gendered systems of dominance. Their work encompasses all facets of women's lives, gender relations, women's movements, and strategic approaches. In this study, these terms will be used to provide a critical lens through which to understand and analyse power relations in the book of Judges and the narrative in Judges 16. By emphasizing the gendered nature

of power and its intersections with other forms of oppression, feminist scholars have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics. Moreover, feminist researchers bring feminist theorisations, concepts, and methods to bear on the work of demystifying existing gendered systems of domination.

2. Critical fabulations – Critical fabulations represent a feminist practice and speculative endeavour that employs supposition, storytelling, and imagination to construct more liveable and inclusive worlds (Lapp 2023:126). These fabulations serve as an infrastructure for disseminating feminist ideas and imaginative concepts. By examining Delilah’s character in the biblical narrative of Judges 16, particularly her experience as a woman in captivity, we gain a distinctive perspective through which to analyse power dynamics.
3. Femme Fatale – Referring to captivating mysterious biblical female characters.
4. Dialectics of Power – Understanding that dialectics involves the interplay of opposing forces or contradictions. It’s a way of understanding change and development through the tension between opposing elements. In the context of power, dialectics highlight the complexities and tensions inherent in power relations. For this study and in the context of Judges 16, examining power dynamics reveals tensions related to trust, vulnerability, and agency. Delilah’s portrayal as a seductive temptress reinforces traditional gender roles. The exclusive language used in interpreting the text can either perpetuate existing power structures or serve as a tool for empowerment and identity creation.
5. Personification - Form of cultural stereotyping that reflects the values and societal norms of the time.
6. Stereotyping - The attribution of specific traits and roles to individuals based on cultural norms and biases.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework for Analysing the Dialectics of Power in Judges 16

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to the foundational overview of the theoretical framework for analysing the dialectics of power in Judges 16. As the research aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of power within the text, I make use of critical fabulations to analyse and form a comprehensive understanding of power relationships, manipulations, and agency in Judges 16. I do this by employing critical fabulations as the theoretical framework that informs the perspective from which I am reading the text to make sense of these discourses on dialectics of power in Judges 16. The methodological choices for this research on the dialectics of power in Judges 16 are essential in providing a rigorous and comprehensive analysis; I make use of a mixture of feminist approaches.

In their discussion, Karim and Azlan (2019:12) highlight the fundamental principles of postmodernist philosophy, which emphasise the subjective nature of truth. They contend that postmodernism disputes the existence of absolute truths, suggesting instead that truths are formed through individual and collective interpretations influenced by cultural and linguistic contexts. This anti-foundational perspective inherently opposes definitive descriptions and stable definitions, as noted by (Edman 1997:97 cited in Karim and Azlan 2019:12). Karim and Azlan (2019:12) point out the inherent paradox within postmodernism: its core of scepticism and relativism complicates any effort to define or describe it clearly. This intrinsic contradiction results in the lack of a unified theory within postmodernism, placing it alongside other critical frameworks like feminism, which also resist singular, overarching narratives. Consequently, they demonstrate how postmodernism's acceptance of uncertainty and multiplicity fundamentally challenges traditional epistemological foundations.

The connection between postmodernism and feminism is clear, unlike that with modernism. Postmodernism in feminist thought seeks to establish a new paradigm of social critique, diverging from traditional philosophical bases. It highlights the interplay between feminist issues and language, sex, and power, often adopting a cultural perspective. Feminists with a postmodernist outlook frequently employ deconstructive arguments, questioning established facts, especially in gender discussions. They contend that gender is not fixed at birth but is shaped by cultural and linguistic influences. Furthermore, postmodernist feminism suggests that conventional representations of women are not biologically predetermined but are culturally constructed. This viewpoint provides a novel, constructive approach to feminist practices, enabling a critical reassessment of traditional concepts of femininity, reproduction, and sexuality through cultural, historical, and social lenses. This approach, traceable to the second and third waves of feminism, has established a new framework in feminist discourse (Karim and Azlan 2019:12).

2.2 Postmodernism

Barton (1996:233) contends that the term “postmodernism” often evokes irritation due to its apparent contradiction. Many people associate the word “modern” with the present, making it difficult to conceive of anything already existing as “postmodern”. This perception seems like describing the present in the future tense. However, it is essential to recognize that “postmodernism” has a precise meaning. In this context, “modern” also encompasses the technical term “modernist,” which is sometimes used interchangeably. Barton (1996:233) observes that the term “modern” refers to a set of attitudes prevalent since the European enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Modernism, at times associated with “modernity,” posited that problems could be rationally stated and resolved through consensus among right-minded individuals.

According to Perdue (2005:240), postmodernism can be best understood as a comprehensive term that functions as a metatheory encompassing various aspects of reality. Postmodern approaches share a common feature: they engage in the

deconstruction of the epistemologies associated with the Enlightenment and any theories grounded in those epistemologies. What unites these diverse and occasionally conflicting approaches to knowledge, literature, and, in our context, biblical interpretation, is their concerted effort to challenge the fundamental perspectives on identity, unity, and knowledge that have underpinned Western civilisation since the Enlightenment. Their aim is to supplant these foundational views with a multitude of heterogeneous expressions. Unfortunately, some researchers lacking the necessary scholarly rigour and complex reflection of such an endeavour, have misused this method, transforming it into a contentious critique of alternative biblical interpretations and diverse epistemologies.

Barton (1996:234) argues that when applied to the realm of literary and cultural theory, postmodernism should be interpreted as a conjecture pertaining to epistemology, and the philosophical study of knowledge. This perspective asserts that knowledge does not constitute a cohesive corpus of information, consolidated by the structural elements of a common scientific or humanistic vocabulary and a framework that aspires towards the attainment of universal truth. Additionally, Perdue (2005:241) suggests that primarily, postmodernism pertains to the process of cultural translation. This can be categorized into two distinct types. The first type involves the reinterpretation of existing cultural elements. In this context, elements intrinsic to a culture are extracted and subjected to critical re-evaluation. An example of this is the adaptation and transformation of Marxist economic ideology within the framework of postcolonialism. The second type of cultural transformation is more profound and involves challenging the inherent logic of a culture or completely abandoning the perspectives and practices associated with modernity. This aspect is frequently observed in postmodernism and is considered its most prevalent characteristic.

2.2.1 Postmodernism and Biblical Interpretation

Kočí (2014:221) delves into the core ideas of postmodern hermeneutics, highlighting the crucial role of the reader in shaping the meaning of a text. He

suggests that the reader is an active agent in the interpretative process, rather than a passive observer. This view contrasts with the traditional modern hermeneutical approach, which emphasises objective interpretation and often regards subjective influences as unverifiable or biased. Also, Kočí critiques this modern perspective by pointing out the artificial division it creates between the interpreter and the text, a separation he attributes to Enlightenment thinking; by rejecting this division, postmodern hermeneutics promotes a more interactive and dynamic relationship between the reader and the text, recognising that meaning is co-constructed through this interaction. This shift reflects a broader philosophical trend towards acknowledging the subjective aspects of understanding and interpretation, challenging the rigid boundaries set by earlier hermeneutical theories.

Furthermore, Kočí (2014:223) explores the challenges of interpreting ancient texts like the Bible through different hermeneutical frameworks. She contrasts Reader-Response Criticism, which prioritises the text's current relevance and dismisses the ancient context as irretrievable, with Reception History, which values both the historical reception and contemporary interpretation of the text. Kočí further emphasises Gadamer's focus on the historicity of both the text and its interpreter, critiquing modern hermeneutics for its exclusive emphasis on authorial intent as the key to original meaning. He (Gadamer), according to Kočí (2014:223), argues that modern hermeneutics views the temporal gap as a bias that obstructs understanding. In contrast, postmodern hermeneutics expands the interpretative scope to include the text's message, which extends beyond the author's original intent. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's distinctions, Kočí (2014:224) highlights the importance of integrating historical context, textual analysis, and contemporary interpretation to achieve a comprehensive understanding. This approach reflects a shift towards recognizing the dynamic and co-constructed nature of meaning in hermeneutics.

Perdue (2005:248) points out that since the nineteenth century, historical critics acknowledge that interpreters inevitably bring their own perspectives, values, and worldviews to the process of understanding textual meaning. Rather than merely

imposing cultural and theological lenses onto texts, interpreters actively contribute to shaping the significance of those texts. They recognise the dynamic interaction between interpreters and texts, emphasising the active role played by readers in constructing meaning.

2.3 Feminist Criticism

Fewell (1999:268-269) emphasises the intricate and multifaceted characteristics of feminist theory, contending that singular definitions are inherently limiting and insufficient to encapsulate the entirety of feminist criticism. This acknowledgement of complexity shows a broader recognition that feminist theory resists reduction to a single, comprehensive definition due to its diverse and dynamic nature. Fewell (1999:269) expresses a certain degree of ambiguity in her attempts to define feminist criticism, thereby illuminating the difficulties involved in formulating a comprehensive and universally accepted definition. Nonetheless, she delineates the primary focus of feminist criticism as the promotion of women's political, social, and economic rights. This focus serves as a foundational aspect; however, it stays cautious against over-generalisation or the presumption of all viewpoints within feminist discourse. Her hesitance to claim universal representation highlights the significance of acknowledging and valuing the diversity of voices and experiences within the feminist movement, thus advocating for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to feminist theory.

Feminist criticism manifests in diverse forms. By its very essence, it leans toward interdisciplinarity that rejects artificial and restrictive disciplinary boundaries. It actively challenges the constraints imposed by relying solely on a single method for interpretation. When examining the Bible through a feminist perspective, the focal point is not solely the biblical texts themselves but rather centres on the broader concerns of feminism as a worldview and a political endeavour (Exum 2007:65). Exum (2007:65) highlights the argument by Gerda Lerner (1986:144) in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, pointing out that in scholarly discourse, certain feminist scholars have adopted a historical perspective when examining these matters.

Lerner argues that interpreting women's subordination because of historical dynamics rather than an inherent "natural" state allows us to acknowledge the potential for its end through historical means. This means that the Bible presents a fictional world where women actively support male interests. Women emerge as secondary characters, and their voices and perspectives are often silenced. In the roles they hold as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, women are portrayed as dependent on men, strategically cooperating to maintain the status of their male counterparts.

Fewell (1999:269) discusses several important concepts regarding feminism and feminist criticism. She begins by highlighting the difficulty of establishing a comprehensive feminist ideology due to the limited availability of women's historical records. Despite this challenge, she notes that feminism gained significant traction with the women's movement of the 1960^s, evolving into a politically charged and secular discipline that is increasingly permeating various fields within the humanities and sciences. Additionally, Fewell (1999:269) points out that feminist criticism arose from a dissatisfaction with traditional methods of inquiry and, like other new critical approaches, has faced scepticism and condescension. She compares feminist criticism to other ideological critiques, such as Marxist and African American criticism, emphasising that it does not claim objectivity. Instead, feminist criticism challenges the notion of universal truths and prioritises relevance over absolute truth. Fewell (1999:269) asserts that feminist criticism actively resists the categories and definitions imposed by male scholars and artists, particularly their definitions of women, advocating for a more inclusive and relevant understanding of women's experiences and contributions.

Yee (2018:7) asserts that historical power structures, deeply embedded cultural norms, and cultural beliefs are the core causes of discrimination against women, which has sustained gender disparity. Yee suggests that a variety of reasons, including economic inequality, stereotypes, traditional gender roles, unequal access to resources and education, and institutionalised biases, are to blame for these discriminatory beliefs. Furthermore, Stanton (2002:14) admits that patriarchal

systems frequently place a higher priority on male privilege and power, which causes women to be marginalised and oppressed.

According to Fuchs (2000:11), from a cultural perspective, most of the biblical text from Genesis to 2 Kings emphasises the narratives of patriarchs such as Abraham and Jacob, national leaders like Moses and Joshua, judges, early prophets including Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, as well as kings such as Saul and David. The prevailing portrayal of women remains one of dependence on men despite occasional exceptional female characters such as Deborah, the judge, and Miriam, the prophetess. Women often appear as secondary characters in male-dominated narratives; even the efforts to explore prebiblical or extrabiblical sources and traditions cannot negate the final presentation, which consistently relegates women to auxiliary roles, silences their voices, and diminishes their national and religious significance. Feminist criticism in the Old Testament challenges the traditional patriarchal interpretations of biblical texts, seeking to uncover the hidden voices and experiences of women. According to Tribble (1978:21), the Old Testament has been interpreted through a masculine lens, perpetuating gender bias and reinforcing patriarchal power structures. Feminist criticism seeks to subvert this dominant paradigm by employing a multiplicity of methodologies, including historical-critical, literary, and cultural analysis. Fewell (1999:275) critiques feminist criticism in biblical studies, highlighting its paradoxes and limitations. While essential for examining women's roles and characterisations in biblical texts, feminist criticism inadvertently reinforces a patriarchal framework by defining women as the "other." This focus on women, based on their differences from men, positions them as subjects of investigation rather than integral parts of the narrative. She notes that whether women are portrayed positively or as minimal and helpless, the underlying implication is that men's experiences and interests remain the default standard. Additionally, Fewell (1999:275) observes that recognising the gendered nature of writing, which reflects gendered experiences, often results in mere observations rather than substantive changes in biblical criticism. This critique calls for a more nuanced and inclusive approach that challenges the foundational assumptions of patriarchal norms in biblical scholarship. According to Stanton (2002:18), feminist

criticism has had a significant impact on how texts are interpreted because it has illuminated gender relations, power dynamics, and how women are portrayed. Therefore, by examining how gender influences characters, plotlines, and themes, it has made it possible to question the conventional literary method of analysis.

In her scholarly work *Feminist Hebrew Literary Criticism: The Political Unconscious*, Fuchs (2007:195) emphasises the idea that what we often perceive as natural or self-evident in social reality is constructed through ideological means. This interpretive activity, which she refers to as “political,” aims to reveal these underlying ideological constructions. Furthermore, she (Fuchs) draws on Fredric Jameson’s concept of the “political unconscious,” suggesting that all texts carry hidden political meanings. This idea is significant in various postmodern discourses, including feminism. According to Fuchs (2007:195), Western literary criticism tends to overlook these political dimensions because it often attributes literary creativity to individual talent, personal biography, or universal human psychology, presenting it as something natural and seamless; thus, advocating for a critical approach that recognises and unveils the ideological underpinnings of texts, challenging the notion that they are purely natural or self-evident.

Feminist scholars argue that relying solely on a single methodology limits the interpretation of biblical texts, neglecting the diverse experiences and perspectives of women. By incorporating feminist theory and criticism, scholars can uncover the gendered dynamics and power relations within the text, revealing the ways in which women's lives and experiences have been marginalized or distorted. Fuchs (2008:210) stresses that feminist epistemology sees all types of knowledge as influenced by relations of power, referencing Jane Flax’s ideas and pointing out that feminist theorists examine and challenge gender systems that maintain dominance. Unlike other movements or ways of thinking, feminist theory is specifically dedicated to analysing and dismantling these oppressive structures. Motivated by feminist critiques and political changes in literary studies, she further examines that the current academic interpretations of biblical texts often support traditional hierarchies, authority, and gender roles, noting that this critical analysis seeks to reveal and address how these interpretations reinforce existing power relations,

aligning with the broader goals of feminist epistemology to question and break down oppressive forms of knowledge.

Also, Fewell (1999:270) delves into the intricate challenges of feminist reclamation within historical disciplines, with a particular focus on biblical studies. She notes that while the process of reclaiming often involves rediscovering women's texts and fostering new literary contributions from women, it is frequently less promising in historical contexts where new texts are limited. In such scenarios, feminist scholars must engage with texts authored by men, which were neither intended for nor written by women. This necessitates reading between the lines of these "alien" texts to uncover the presence and voices of women that have been historically muted or rendered invisible. Correspondingly, the argument by Brenner (1993:17) that feminist criticism has also led to a re-evaluation of the portrayal of women in the Old Testament, challenging the traditional stereotypes and biases that have been perpetuated through patriarchal interpretations. Feminist scholarship has recovered the stories and experiences of women, such as Deborah, Ruth, and Esther, highlighting their agency, courage, and leadership in the face of patriarchal oppression.

Fuchs (2007:196) discusses the function of political criticism in revealing and contesting the dominant knowledge systems that present their interpretations of personal and national life as absolute truths. Within feminist Hebrew literary criticism, she further highlights two fundamental areas of resistance: the marginalisation of women from the literary canon and a post-Zionist critique of the nation's gendered construction. This national feminist critique examines the exclusion of Zionist female figures from national narratives. It seeks to establish an alternative space for these figures, often situating them within an androgynous cultural context. This approach contrasts the feminine culture of Yiddish with the masculine culture of Hebrew, emphasizing the cultural constructs that define gender identities. The core objective of national feminism is to uncover and give voice to the women who have significantly influenced and shaped the nation, thereby challenging the dominant narratives that have historically silenced them. Fewell (1999:270) finds the Bible as a quintessential example, highlighting its

significant influence on gender roles, sexuality, and social norms even in contemporary society. She observes that some feminist critics question the value of reading the Bible, given its patriarchal origins and its use in justifying male dominance and the subordination of women. Despite these challenges, she emphasises the importance of this critical engagement, as it enables feminist scholars to challenge and reinterpret traditional narratives that have long shaped societal views on gender. Fuchs (2000:16) highlights the political dimensions inherent in biblical texts, asserting that narrative elements such as characterisation, perspective, dialogue, and type-scenes are influenced by a patriarchal ideology. This ideology, which she describes as a network of beliefs centred on male dominance, manipulates literary techniques to reinforce male authority. She (Fuchs) further argues that patriarchal ideology is closely linked with other dominant biblical ideologies like monotheism and ethnocentrism, which collectively support the notion that men are divinely chosen to lead and represent the nation. This results in the prominence of men in roles such as priests, scribes, judges, kings, and prophets. According to Fuchs (2000:16), patriarchal ideology forms the basis of biblical sexual politics, with literary strategies employed to justify and maintain the subordinate status of women in biblical narratives.

Various interpretations of gender dynamics within biblical texts focus on the story of Eve. Fewell (1999:272) contrasts the efforts of some critics who have reinterpreted the text to present Eve in a more favourable light, with those who approach the text with scepticism. She further asks questions about whether the ancient authors intended to depict Eve as equal, bold, decisive, and wise or if the traditional interpretations that portray her as gullible and foolish are more accurate. On the surface the text implies Eve's inferiority, her role as the first sinner, and her responsibility for humanity's fallen state. This raises broader questions about the gendered nature of writing and the sexual politics of biblical authors. Fewell (1999:273) interrogates who has defined the positive and negative qualities of women in the Bible and whether the traits valued in women, such as beauty, submissiveness, obedience, fecundity, and industriousness, are merely those endorsed by a patriarchal society. She also considers the portrayal of less

admirable female characters, like Jezebel and Delilah, suggesting that their negative depictions might serve as a political strategy aimed at controlling women's self-perception and societal roles.

2.3.1 Feminist Theology

According to Perdue (2005:104), feminist theology shows considerable diversity in terms of theory, methodology, analysis, and objectives. This discourse has evolved over time, with scholars increasingly advocating for a heuristic model that distinguishes between the first and second generations of feminist theology. The first generation primarily focused on critiquing and highlighting the limitations of theological frameworks that failed to address women's issues and experiences seriously. In contrast, the second generation moved beyond critique to offer a more systematic presentation. Furthermore, contemporary feminist hermeneutics and modern biblical studies have actively reshaped theological language and methodology for over a generation. However, Fuchs (2008:209) asserts that feminist epistemology goes beyond simply criticising ideological frameworks, particularly the cultural representations of gender inequalities. It also seeks to question traditional standards and methods used in various academic fields. This critique addresses phallogocentrism, which refers to the dominant systems of truth in different areas of study. By describing the authoritative literary interpretation of the Bible as "the objective phallacy", Fuchs (2008:209) emphasises a key idea in feminist epistemology – that all knowledge is political, especially male-centred views of important texts like the Bible. Feminist epistemology is both critical and political, underscoring the influence of politics on how knowledge is created. Additionally, it is self-reflective, recognising its own context and involvement while remaining critical of claims that knowledge can be coherent or universal. This dual emphasis on critique and self-critique demonstrates the dynamic and reflective nature of feminist epistemology.

Feminist theology has significantly impacted the interpretation of Old Testament texts, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of God

and God's relationship with humanity. As Russell (1985:13) notes, feminist theology challenges the traditional masculine imagery of God, seeking to reclaim and redefine the divine in more inclusive and gender-neutral terms. This shift in perspective has far-reaching implications for the way we understand gender roles, power dynamics, and social justice within the biblical text.

In feminist theology, important themes and emphases serve as common threads across diverse expressions. Women's liberation represents a multifaceted response to systemic oppression and victimisation, employing various strategies to effect social, economic, political, cultural, and religious change. This transformation aims not only to achieve gender equality but also to recognise and authenticate women's full humanity (Perdue 2005:104). Within social structures, gender often reinforces male domination (patriarchy) and female subordination. The ideological foundation of patriarchy lies in sexism, which can manifest both openly and covertly. Feminism actively seeks to identify instances of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchal forces that exploit and subordinate women, aiming to subvert them through a range of strategies (Perdue 2005:104).

According to Ruether (2013:584) feminism seeks to deconstruct this whole system, both symbolically and socially. Feminism rejects the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant (rationalist, power over others) and women with those defined as inferior or auxiliary (intuition, passivity). The goal is a redefinition of both men and women as fully and equivalently human." She (Ruether) suggests that feminist theology transcends the mere participation of women in theological discourse, as such participation does not inherently challenge the dominant masculinist paradigms of traditional theology. Historically, women have engaged in theology without questioning these paradigms, which perpetuates the status quo. Additionally, feminist theology is not confined to the affirmation of "feminine" themes. These themes have historically been constructed to complement and reinforce masculine constructs within Western thought, which further entrenches gender hierarchies. Consequently, the mere inclusion of feminine themes in theological discourse often serves to uphold rather than subvert existing gender paradigms.

Ruether (2013:585-586) further asserts that feminism embodies a critical stance that contests the patriarchal gender paradigm. This paradigm associates men with traits deemed superior and dominant, such as rationality and power, while relegating women to traits considered inferior and auxiliary, such as intuition and passivity. She notes that few feminists have consistently advocated for a female-dominant perspective. Instead, Ruether champions an egalitarian approach as the normative stance within feminism, recognizing the difficulty of envisioning new paradigms of gender relations. Feminist theology, therefore, extends feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm, challenging the deep-seated gender biases that have shaped traditional theology. Mokoena (2021:38) argues that gender constructs, which often influence interpretation in subtle and nuanced ways, need to be critically examined and unearthed. In her essay *Reclaiming Jezebel and Mrs. Job: Challenging Sexist Cultural Stereotypes and the Curse of Invisibility* she addresses the ways in which women are absolved from reductive and violent narratives that have historically depicted them as she-devils, king slayers, harlots, or evil figures. Through a liberating reinterpretation of these texts, Mokoena seeks to challenge and overturn these sexist stereotypes. This study similarly aims to re-examine the narrative of Delilah in Judges 16, traditionally viewed as a seductress who deceived Samson. By offering a new interpretation, the study seeks to absolve Delilah from this reductionist portrayal and highlight the broader context of her actions.

Consequently, Fewell (1999:273) discusses the concept of gender as a social construct, differentiating it from biological sex differences. She argues that while individuals are born male or female, their identities as men and women are shaped by societal expectations and cultural norms. This involves conforming to roles and behaviours that society deems appropriate for each gender. She (Fewell) reinforces this idea by citing Myra Jehlen 1981 work "*Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism*" where she argues that femininity is not an inherent state, but a performance dictated by cultural standards. This perspective challenges the notion of fixed, natural gender identities and emphasises the fluid and variable nature of gender as it is constructed and performed within different social contexts. By

highlighting the performative aspect of gender, Fewell (1999:273) encourages a critical examination of how societal norms influence individual identities and perpetuate gender roles. This approach promotes a deeper understanding of the ways in which gender is continuously negotiated and redefined through social interactions and cultural practices.

2.3.2 Feminist interpretation of history

Biblical texts are not mere social snapshots but are complex constructs of ideology, theology, culture, and tradition. Recovering these texts involves engaging in oppositional or resistant readings to reshape dominant interpretations. Through rigorous hermeneutics and exegesis, these elements can be addressed to bridge the significant gap between ancient and contemporary societies (Mokoena 2021:38). While feminist biblical scholars display a variety of approaches in their studies, according to Newport (1996:139), some scholars focus on analysing biblical narratives, texts, and motifs that resonate with contemporary women's experiences. Others interpret the entirety of the biblical scriptures through a feminine lens to discern the interpretative disparities between female and male perspectives. Another group engages with the biblical text as women, aiming to challenge patriarchal structures by highlighting how the Bible may serve as an instrument of female subjugation. Schüssler-Fiorenza (2001:1) argues that engaging in feminist biblical exegesis involves reading and interpreting the scriptures through the lens of feminist theories of justice and movements advocating for societal transformation. According to Perdue (2005:105), employing feminism as a social, historical, and theological lens to present biblical theology is complex and multifaceted. Scholars across various disciplines, biblical scholars, historians, literary critics, and feminists, have endeavoured to recover women's stories within the Bible and Christian tradition. This effort aims to acknowledge the significant contributions of women, which have often been lost, forgotten, or suppressed by patriarchal narratives. These scholars employ a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to uncover evidence of patriarchal efforts to silence women's voices within scripture. Moreover, Sawyer (1990:231) encapsulates the commonality

among diverse feminist interpretative methods with the assertion that “Feminist interpretation of the Bible presents an alternative evaluation of Biblical accounts, as perceived through the experiences and viewpoints of female readers and theologians” (Sawyer 1990:231). Liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, social feminism, postmodern feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, postcolonial feminism, and ecofeminism are just a few of the various schools of thought that Yee (2018:2) argues are present in feminist studies.

Trible (1984:3) characterises feminist hermeneutics as a visionary movement that critiques existing conditions, delivers judgements, and advocates for reform by engaging with the Scriptures in multifaceted manners.

In the process of recovering women's history, Perdue (2005:105) emphasises that this endeavour is not merely an antiquarian interest or an expression of pride in women's achievements. Rather, it seeks to affirm the full humanity of women and to discover new models of female leadership. This recovery is both a retrospective acknowledgement of women's historical contributions and a forward-looking effort to envision new paradigms of gender relations.

Mokoena (2021:38) underscores the importance of feminist biblical interpretation as a critical tool, highlighting that there is no singular method for feminist exegesis. Recognising the diversity of interpretations is essential, as the lived experiences of readers inform these interpretations. Additionally, Perdue (2005:105) argues that rejecting the Bible as irredeemably sexist accepts the biases of male interpreters, thereby allowing the Bible's misogynistic elements to remain unchallenged. Feminism, therefore, proceeds on two fronts concerning the Bible: it questions male-dominated interpretations of history and scripture, and it promotes feminist interpretations and reconstructions. By doing so, feminism challenges the authority of an unexamined Bible that continues to oppress women, advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to biblical interpretation and theology. Thiselton (1992:410) and other scholars have observed that feminist theology shares certain themes and concerns with liberation theology. Unlike liberation theologians who advocate for the oppressed as external supporters, feminist theologians address oppression from within the framework of gender. It was not until the advent of third-

wave feminism in the late twentieth century that class issues were incorporated into feminist theological discourse.

Feminist theologians are tasked with the intricate endeavour of bridging biblical texts and contemporary societal contexts, as noted by Gillingham (1998:141). In contemporary Christian theological discourse, feminists are actively developing alternatives to traditional interpretative methods, aiming to mitigate the detrimental impacts of patriarchal structures and integrate women's perspectives. Carmody (1995:66) highlights that feminist theologians seek to enrich both the church and society by foregrounding contributions from women who encounter the divine in a female form. Feminist criticism has been crucial to the freedom of contemporary women by bringing attention to the underlying gender inequality, challenging repressive conventions, and promoting social, political, economic, cultural, and religious reform, to name but a few. According to Yee (2018:5), a feminist interpretation of a work reveals and challenges patriarchal systems that limit women's liberties and rights. According to Stanton (2002:25), this critical viewpoint enables women to identify and oppose internalized sexism, so enabling them to exercise their agency and demand equal treatment in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, she asserts that feminist criticism stimulates activism by emphasizing the value of intersectionality, diversity, and representation in addressing the range of women's experiences.

2.4 Critical Fabulations

Critical fabulations, according to Mokoena (2022:5), is a methodological approach that combines historical facts with speculative fiction to fill in gaps in historical records, particularly those concerning marginalised groups. It is a term coined by Saidiya Hartman and involves the use of narrative to imagine and construct histories that might have been or might be, especially scant or biased.

Saidiya Hartman's essay *Venus in Two Acts* delves into the complexities of narratives surrounding violence, memory, and the quest for redress. She grapples with the challenge of recounting violence while avoiding perpetuating harm. Rather

than merely documenting violence, Hartman weaves a narrative about girls who defy the odds by reclaiming their lives from the past. Her work confronts the impossibility of listening for the unspoken, translating misconstrued words, and reshaping disfigured lives. Hartman faces a dilemma in recovering lives intertwined with utterances that condemned them whether through death sentences, accounting records, or banal chronicles. Can the shock of these words yield a strange beauty? What form should the narrative take to honour the unknowable while giving voice to suffering? Critical fabulation is rooted in the concept of silenced voices.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot expands on Foucault's concept of power relations to address the matter of silenced voices, especially about historical narratives. His main contention is that historical narratives are influenced by power dynamics, which results in what he refers to as "silences" in historical production. He contends that there are four pivotal points at which silences enter historical production:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance) (Trouillot 1995:26).

Trouillot used the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) as a prime example of how historical silencing operates. He showed how the dominant Western epistemological frameworks, which were unable to imagine enslaved people as capable of such political organisation and military accomplishment, made this momentous event "unthinkable" even as it was happening.

The concept of "power-knowledge" relationships is central to Trouillot's analysis, though he extends beyond Foucault's framework by emphasising the material conditions and practices that produce historical silences. As he states: "Power is constitutive of the story" (Trouillot 1995:29). The significance of Trouillot's framework lies in its demonstration that silences in historical records are not merely gaps to be filled but are themselves artefacts of power that require critical analysis. His work continues to influence scholars examining how marginalized voices are

systematically excluded from historical narratives and how this exclusion can be addressed methodologically.

Sider and Smith (1997:16-17) refer to the aspect of silenced voices in historical narratives as follows:

When we speak of silence or when we speak 'for' or to the silenced, we must ourselves first do a much better job of listening. As the transformations of our attempts to bring our version of class consciousness to the 'silenced' persons shows, the process of listening to, and for, silences must also be the process of rethinking some of our most cherished and romantically compelling concepts and collective self-perceptions. The silenced, may be particularly silent precisely to us, and that silence, rather than what we might wish it, may be a politically significant component of their consciousness of class - their consciousness both of their class and of ours and the multiple kinds of connections, spaces, and silences within and between theirs and ours.

They (Sider & Smith 1997:17) point out that the non-White new-born death rate in the US has been three times higher than the White infant mortality rate since the middle of the 20th century. These children died not only in silence, but also from silence.

As Mokoena (2022:3-4) seeks to establish a connection between the interpretative methods used in biblical feminist interpretation (BFI) and those within the black radical tradition, the goal is not to merge these approaches but to use them together to create a future archive that honours and preserves marginalised voices, or as Trouillot describes it – silenced voices. Furthermore, she stresses the need for a guiding manifesto in this reconstruction effort, encapsulated by the phrase “the downtrodden” (*le bona ke batho*) which highlights the humanity of the oppressed. However, Mokoena (2022:3-4) indicates that the author of *Wayward Live Beautiful* contrasts the usual experiences of blackness, womanhood, and feminism often characterised by negation, death, silence, dismemberment, and othering with powerful imagery of noise, chanting, and howling bodies. This depiction suggests a collective uprising and a vocal assertion of presence, indicating that the archive is

an active, speaking entity that demands recognition and engagement. Consequently, in research, critical fabulation is used to challenge and expand upon established narratives allowing scholars to explore the implications of historical events and the lives of individuals who have been overlooked or misrepresented by traditional historiography. It is a way of engaging with history that acknowledges the influence of power on the production of knowledge and seeks to recover the voices of those who have been silenced. Barr (1992:185) describes the practice of critical fabulations as follows:

The feminist fabulators ... create protagonists who socially reposition themselves after rewriting patriarchal discourses (i.e., fables) about women. By doing so, the authors simultaneously critique the process of excluding women from postmodern discourse and reposition themselves as postmodernists according to their own terms, not according to the terms of stellar male theorists.

Within the framework of this theological feminist study, critical fabulations are utilised to re-evaluate the Old Testament story of Delilah. This approach aims to construct a new narrative that explores the perspective, motivations and socio-cultural factors that shaped the literary character (metaphor) of Delilah. By employing critical fabulations, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of her character, moving beyond traditional interpretations that often portray her negatively. Additionally, this method highlights the experiences and agency of women in biblical texts, which are frequently marginalised in conventional theological discourse. Critical fabulations, as noted by a sociologist and feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, in her book *Queer Phenomenology*, is a methodological approach that combines critical analysis with fabulation (storytelling) to reimagine and reinterpret dominant narratives, especially those related to identity, power, and social justice. Critical fabulations involve examining and challenging dominant discourses, power structures, and normative assumptions through critical analysis. This process includes creating alternative narratives, stories, and scenarios that disrupt and reimagine the status quo, known as fabulation. Additionally, it engages in speculative and imaginative thinking to explore possibilities and potentialities,

thereby creating new worlds, possibilities, and futures through storytelling and imagination.

Critical fabulations aims to disrupt dominant narratives and power structures, create new possibilities for identity, community, and social justice, and imagine alternative futures and worlds. By revising patriarchal master narratives, the imaginative works that fall under the critical fabulation umbrella address living in accordance with alternative myths and fictions. It also seeks to challenge normative assumptions and dominant discourses. Critical fabulations is a creative and critical approach to reimagining and reworking the world around us through the power of storytelling and imagination. By analysing texts for these elements, the study aims to uncover possible alternative motives for Delilah's actions, moving beyond the traditional femme fatale portrayal.

2.5 Synthesis

This chapter was dedicated to the foundational overview of the theoretical framework for analysing the dialectics of power in Judges 16. As the research aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of power within the text, critical discourse analysis is used to analyse and form a comprehensive understanding of power relationships, manipulations, and agency in Judges 16. By employing critical fabulations as the theoretical framework that informs the perspective from which the texts will be read, I will attempt to make sense of these discourses on dialectics of power in Judges 16. The methodological choices for this research on the dialectics of power in Judges 16 are essential in providing thorough analysis; I make use of a mixture of the feminist approaches. A concept like critical fabulation is embedded in feminist criticism, which developed from postmodern thoughts. Critical fabulation developed from the need to hear the silenced voices that were ignored and oppressed by the powers behind texts. To rethink or reimagine a history that has not been told, one needs critical fabulations. Critical fabulations aims to disrupt dominant narratives and power structures, create new possibilities for identity, community, and social justice, and imagine alternative futures and worlds. It seeks

to challenge normative assumptions and dominant discourses. Critical fabulations is a creative and critical approach to reimagine and rework the world around us through the power of storytelling and imagination.

This chapter gave the theoretical framework for the concept of critical fabulation. The next chapter will focus on the historical context of the book of Judges.

Chapter 3: The Historical Context of Judges

3.1 Introduction

The Book of Judges is included in the primary segment of the Old Testament known as the Historical Books. As a crucial text within the Hebrew Bible, it chronicles Israel's transformation from a nomadic tribe to an established nation. This era, marked by recurring cycles of sin, repentance, and deliverance, provides significant insights into Israel's early history. Additionally, the Old Testament books are inherently theological (Martin 1975:1). Furthermore, according to Curtis (1913:1), the text of the Book of Judges shares a common history with the entirety of the Old Testament.

The deliverer episodes, which include the oldest traditions in Judges, form the core of the book. These tales tell of strange, frequently violent narratives, of improbable heroes and heroines, and of local conflicts. The deliverer stories, in contrast to the editorial framework, present "Israel" as fragmented and tribal rather than as a cohesive entity. Though it is a risky endeavour to equate biblical history with historical reality, this viewpoint more closely reflects the historical reality of early Israel than do the stories of Israel's massive, cohesive conquests under Joshua. Most of these old traditions occur in Israel, not Judah, and might have originated as a distinct collection of tales about northern saviours (Judg 3-9, 11). The Samson stories found in Judges 13-16 are set in the *šəpēlâ*, or lowlands, which are situated between Judah and the western coast, rather than in the north (like the preceding saviour narratives). Although the Samson cycle includes old traditions, it was added separately, and possibly much later, to the saviour narratives of the north (Leonard-Fleckman 2021:403). The book of Judges' compilers employed these older traditions, combining them into a theological framework that served as an editorial lens to explain Israel's ongoing oppression by its enemies during the early settlement period. Encounters with Assyrian and Babylonian invaders shaped this framework much later. Literary similarities between Samson, Saul, and David

provide a gateway into 1 Samuel's early monarchy narrative (Leonard-Fleckman 2021:403).

The book of Judges has recently earned significant attention, an absolute contrast to its status several decades ago when it was overshadowed by the more prominent Torah (Pentateuch) and theologically significant prophetic writings. This shift in focus has led to the historical texts, whether considered as the second section of the Christian Bible or the initial part of the Former Prophets in the Jewish Bible, becoming a central subject of scholarly interest over the past twenty years (Brettler 2002: ix). Brettler (2002:1) argues that in evaluating the text of Judges, it is crucial to consider whether it should be regarded as a historical account aiming to represent the actual past. Should we assume that the biblical authors adhered to Lucian's principles in *How to Write History*, we might infer that the primary objective of the material in Judges was to document events from the pre-monarchic era. Conversely, if we do not accept that the author's main intention was to portray historical events, our interpretation of the texts will differ, prompting us to pose alternative questions. It is essential to recognise that the book of Judges offers a multifaceted narrative, rich in historical, theological, and literary dimensions. Positioned within the historical books of the Old Testament, it documents Israel's transformation from a loose confederation of tribes to a more centralised nation. A recurring cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance marks this era, illustrating Israel's evolving relationship with God and neighbouring nations. The book of Judges presents significant interpretive challenges due to its social and historical context, and this chapter delves into these complexities through sociological, historical, and literary analyses. By examining these ancient narratives, we uncover the moral ambiguities, social critiques, and theological messages they convey.

3.2 Dating and Authorship

As previously mentioned, the Book of Judges is a compilation of narratives derived from various sources. It is essential to distinguish whether discussions on dating

and authorship pertain to the entire book or specific narratives. Information on these aspects is notably sparse, with no authors explicitly named or identified. Although Jewish tradition attributes the authorship to Samuel, no substantial evidence corroborates this claim (Evans 2017:16). Younger (2002:25-26) asserts that the authorship of the book of Judges remains unknown. The text appears to be a compilation of distinct segments detailing the various Judges. While some narratives might have originated in early oral or written traditions, the text does not attribute these segments to specific sources. Despite considerable efforts by modern scholars to trace these origins, their success has been limited.

Concurring with the uncertainty of the book of Judges, Amos (2020:201) notes that John Mayer argues that the authorship is uncertain, with some attribution to Samuel and others to Ezra. However, some scholars propose that multiple authors contributed over time, given the extensive period covered by history, during which God appointed thirteen judges whose combined years of service are considerable. Furthermore, Amos (2020:201) points out that Lavater suggests that the anonymity of the author indicates that nothing definitive can be stated about the writer of this book. While some believe Samuel authored it, others speculate on the instruments he might have used.

Regardless of the author, Amos (2020:201) highlights Jackson's emphasis that the identity of the writer is not explicitly stated. It is sufficient to know that the book has been preserved within the church as part of the divine oracles, written under the infallible inspiration of the Spirit. Notably, many interpreters consider the passage concerning Samson to be particularly significant. Consequently, Amos (2020:201-202) refers to the Reformed theologian Vermigli when posing that the Hebrews assert Samuel documented these events, although this claim lacks scriptural testimony. Each judge recorded events from their own time, which Samuel later compiled into a single volume, according to others. Additionally, some attribute the compilation to Esdras or King Hezekiah, who is mentioned in the book of Proverbs as having collected some of Solomon's sayings.

3.2.1 The Compositional Historical Context

The book of Judges consists of multiple sections, each focusing on distinct topics. When examined from a literary perspective rather than a historical one, it becomes essential to investigate the origins of these sections, and the methods and individuals involved in their compilation. The stylistic variations among the sections suggest multiple sources. Over centuries of biblical scholarship, various theories have been proposed to address the questions of the book's origins and authorship (Martin 1975:5). Currently, there is a consensus that the book of Judges is part of a larger collection, which includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, with Deuteronomy serving as a preface. This collection is recognised as a cohesive historical work, known as the Deuteronomistic History written from the theological perspective of Deuteronomy (Martin 1975:5). It is evident that the Deuteronomistic historian, who finalised the compilation around 550 B.C., did not create the narrative from scratch but rather utilised various sources and earlier compilations, often incorporating his theological viewpoints (Martin 1975:5).

Evans (2017: 17) also points to the widespread belief, based on both verbal and theological connections, that Judges, like Joshua, Samuel, and Kings, is linked to Deuteronomy. The term "Deuteronomistic History" is widely accepted to describe this broader section of the Old Testament, highlighting the connections among these books. Butler (2009: xiv) notes that since Martin Noth's influential work *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, (translated as "The Deuteronomist History") the scholarly discourse on the composition of Judges has largely focused on the Deuteronomistic Historian's final editorial shaping and interpretation, alongside the books of Joshua, Samuel, and Kings. Noth argued that a key outcome of scholarly research was the identification of a Deuteronomistic author for these texts. He also believed that the Deuteronomistic language and style are easily identifiable. One prominent feature of this style is the practice of beginning and ending major narrative sections with speeches by principal characters. Weinfeld (1972:260) underlines the notable similarities between the laws in Deuteronomy and those in both Israelite and non-Israelite wisdom literature, indicating a profound connection

between these texts. Moreover, Weinfeld suggests that the scholarly inclination to view biblical wisdom literature as being influenced by Deuteronomy is misguided. This assumption, which was widespread in the early 20th-century biblical scholarship, was based on the belief that Deuteronomy was written before Proverbs. However, recent findings of ancient wisdom texts have shown that Israelite wisdom teachings are much older, thus predating Deuteronomy. These ancient wisdom traditions more likely influenced Deuteronomy rather than the other way around.

According to Amit (2009:297), dating a biblical text is a multifaceted endeavour that necessitates the use of assumptions that have become foundational in contemporary research or widely acknowledged. She argues that taking into consideration these assumptions, when it comes to the book of Judges, before the decision to date the book is considered, firstly, we should highlight the connection between the book and the Deuteronomistic school. Amit (2009:298) points out that Martin Noth's theory, widely accepted in the late 20th century, identified the book of Judges as part of a larger Deuteronomistic composition. This composition includes several books from the Deuteronomy to Kings, covering events from the end of the desert wanderings to the first temple destruction and the exile from Judah. North suggested that one person wrote and edited this composition after the first temple's destruction.

Webb (2012:10) explains that the Book of Judges covers the history of Israel from the death of Joshua to the beginning of the monarchy with Samuel. The conclusion of this era can be accurately determined by tracing back to David's reign (1010-970 B.C.). Considering that Saul's reign lasted thirty-two years, this dates his reign to 1042 B.C. Both Samuel and Eli, who preceded him, are noted to have died at an old age after long ministries, each lasting approximately forty years. Therefore, it is reasonable to estimate around eighty years for the combined Eli-Samuel period. This suggests that the period covered by Judges ended around 1092 B.C. However, the Eli-Samuel period itself was closer to seventy years, given that Samuel's ministry overlapped with the early years of Saul's reign. According to Knauf (2019:213), the book of Judges has a longer "gestation period" than Joshua,

indicating a more extended development over time. He proposes that half of the historical memory in Judges originates from the early Persian period (500-400 B.C.E.), which he considers the “present” of the book’s narrative. An additional 25% is attributed to the 8th through the 6th centuries B.C.E., with less contribution from the 10th and 9th centuries B.C.E. The narrative of Judges begins in the late 8th or early 7th century B.C.E. with the “Book of Saviours” (Judges 3-9/12). It extends until at least the 3rd century B.C.E. Additionally, Younger (2002:26) observes that the phrase “the time of the captivity of the land” in Judges 18:30 likely refers to the exile periods of either 722 or 586 B.C. This implies that the final version of the book was compiled during or after the exile. Consequently, the exact author and date of the book remain uncertain. Knauf (2019:214-215) examines the historical context of the book of Judges, proposing that while there are connections to known historical events of the 1st millennium B.C.E., these do not necessarily confirm the text’s basis in actual occurrences. He suggests that historical parallels diminish the likelihood of the text referring to unknown events or figures from the 2nd millennium. Specifically, Judges 1:22-26 is situated between the late 4th and early 3rd century, linked to the Samaritan tradition referencing Gerizim and supported by archaeological data about the temple established after the Bethel sanctuary’s destruction. This places Gerizim in Greater Syria, outside Yehud/Judaea. Moreover, Knauf (2019:215) indicates that Judges 3:12-30, dated to the late 8th or early 7th century, identifies three key features: the plausibility of Ehud’s violent act against Eglon during a period of weak central authority; the recognition of Moabite presence near Jericho post-Mesha’s conquest; and the mention of Assyrian-style plumbing, indicating a context consistent with the establishment of provincial capitals in a later period. He also highlights Jephthah’s victory in Judges 11:33, which defines the southern border of the Ammonites around the late 6th century B.C.E., suggesting aggressive actions from the south, by Moabite forces or a Babylonian army.

Lastly, Knauf (2019:218) explores the Samson narrative (Judges 13-16), which reflects a 6th or 5th century rivalry between Judaeans and Philistines, occurring without state intervention. He emphasises the cultural parallels between Greek and Hebrew narratives, suggesting that shared themes might originate from earlier

Bronze Age interactions rather than a Hellenistic context. Additionally, references to the Danites' migration (Judges 17-18) trace back to the 4th century, indicating Judaeon colonisation of Galilee, marking a significant demographic shift starting in the 6th century B.C.E. and intensifying by the late 2nd century B.C.E. Amit (2009:299) critically analyses the dating and ideological context of the Book of Judges, particularly considering its possible Deuteronomistic origins. She argues that it cannot be dated to the late 7th century B.C.E.; if Judges is indeed Deuteronomistic as proposed by Cross and his followers, who connect its writing to the era of Josiah. Rather, Amit (2009:299) aligns with Noth and his followers, suggesting that it should be dated to the mid-6th century B.C.E., after the destruction. Furthermore, Amit asserts that if Judges is Deuteronomistic, it ought to display the fundamental concepts and ideologies typical of Deuteronomistic beliefs and practices. The language and style of Judges should also mirror the Deuteronomistic worldview. This analysis emphasises the importance of identifying specific Deuteronomistic features within the text to support its classification and dating, thus contributing to the wider discussion regarding the historical and theological context of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Scholars commonly recognise the presence of Deuteronomistic themes, especially in the introductory sections (Judges 2:6-3:6) and the overarching narrative of the judge's stories (Judges 3:7-11, 12-15, 30; 4:1-3, 23-24; 5:31b; 6:1-2, 6; 8:27b-28; 10:6-16; 13:1; 15:20; 16:31b). Yet, these thematic elements do not permeate the individual stories, which do not reflect the Deuteronomistic style or ideology. These narratives seem to originate from earlier sources, often termed the 'Book of Saviours' by academics. This allows for a historical analysis of the narratives' evolution, beginning with their origins in the 'Book of Saviours' and their subsequent integration into the Deuteronomistic framework (Amit 2009:299-300). Knauf (2018:213) argues that the text's expansion of Judges resembles the growth of pre-exilic literature, which developed incrementally from both its start and end points. The "Book of Saviours" was formed as a response to the loss of Israel's monarchy and sovereignty. Initially, the text that would become the "Book of Judges" was distinctly Israelite, as was the initial version of Hosea. Both texts addressed the

same political crisis, although with different solutions. During the Persian era, the text underwent Judean revisions, starting with the inclusion of Samson, shifting the narrative from an anti-monarchy stance to one supportive of statehood. The prologue (1:1-3:11) and epilogue (chapters 17-21), each undergoing at least two editorial stages, were crafted to align the “Book of Judges” with its current literary setting.

According to Amit (2009:300), Weinfeld’s careful criteria for linking a text to Deuteronomistic literature, style, and ideas should not be separated. The book of Judges aligns with Deuteronomy and its teachings, especially regarding loyalty to God and opposition to idolatry. These themes are evident in the second preface (2:6-3:6) which heavily features Deuteronomistic language. This section illustrates the sin stage in the cyclical narrative structure unique to Judges, which includes five stages: sin, punishment, crying out, deliverance, and peace. However, most of these stages’ formulations are not distinctly Deuteronomistic (Amit 2009:300). Furthermore, Amit (2009:302) points out that impressions of disloyalty to God and the struggle against idolatry, which are undeniably Deuteronomistic, are infrequent in Judges. These impressions are primarily located in the book’s introduction, particularly in two of the initial verses (Judg 2:12,19).

Amit (2009:304) raises a question and argues, “If Judges was a product of Deuteronomistic editing, what might we anticipate?” The themes that characterise Deuteronomistic writing are not mirrored in the book of Judges, despite plenty of chances for them to be introduced. Furthermore, she underscores three points that she considers significant for subjects that represent Deuteronomistic writing. Firstly, the centralisation of the cult, a fundamental tenet in the Deuteronomistic ideology, is conspicuously absent in the book of Judges, with no reference or acknowledgement from the author(s). Consequently, it is reasonable to infer that the author(s) were unfamiliar with the concept of cult centralisation. Conversely, the book of Judges provides detailed accounts of ritual altars within local and familial settings. Secondly, unlike Deuteronomistic literature, which emphasises prophets as mediators between God and his people, the book of Judges portrays the prophet as a national leader or intermediary for God and his people, a role still in its nascent

stages. Throughout the book, direct interactions between the Divine and humans are frequently reiterated. Moreover, although prophets are mentioned twice in the book of Judges, their presence does not aim to supersede the direct revelation of God, and their role could have been assumed by an angel closely identified with God. Lastly, the Deuteronomistic school depicts the people of Israel as consisting of twelve tribes. This is illustrated when Moses sent twelve spies, one from each tribe (Deut 1:23), and when the blessings and curses were pronounced, the tribes were divided into groups of six (Deut 27:12-13).

Amit (2009:304) points out that the numerical framework of twelve, which serves the Priestly editing of the Pentateuch, is strange to the author(s) of Judges who demonstrate evidence of not being aware that dealing with the people of Israel as a whole necessitated such a twelve-unit framework. Furthermore, Amit (2009:308) highlights that the distinctive Deuteronomistic perspectives are conspicuously absent from the book of Judges. These perspectives do not manifest as either subtle hints or direct comments. Later literature, such as Chronicles, written after the development of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic texts, reflects Deuteronomistic ideas introduced by earlier authors. How these ideas are presented helps us understand the conceptual framework of later writers. Such references are rare in the book of Judges, except for the second preface and a few interpolations by later editors who were not familiar with the Deuteronomistic ideology and style. This suggests that the composition of Judges predates the Deuteronomistic period.

In her conclusion, Amit (2009:317) indicates that the book of Judges goes beyond merely highlighting the moralities of Judah, which persisted during Israel's exile, or the teachings Judah must learn to avoid the same fate as the Northern Kingdom. Its significance extends beyond supporting a monarchy, even with reservations. Instead, the book delves into historiography, the study, contemplation, and recording of historical forces. Authored by individuals independent of monarchical influence, the book of Judges systematically seeks to comprehend and elucidate the historical process, especially in the context of the Northern Kingdom's downfall.

In this sense the Book of Judges can serve as a valuable resource for subsequent generations seeking insights and conclusions.

The book of Judges resonates with the great composition of the Deuteronomistic and eventually finds its place within it (Amit 2009:318). Drawing upon materials originating from the northern regions following the exiles in 732 and 722 B.C.E., author-editors in Judah elaborated and shaped the main portion of the book. The Deuteronomistic writers and redactors transformed this work into a document describing the transition from Joshua's era to the time of the judges. In the Judahite edition, the book of Judges served to bridge the gap from Joshua to the establishment of a king in Israel. Its reworking and placement aimed to prepare readers for the subsequent book, Samuel, which describes the beginnings of the monarchy. Despite being part of Deuteronomistic historiography, the book of Judges maintains its own core message. This perspective highlights literary compositions from the late 8th century B.C.E. onward, preceding Deuteronomy and influencing subsequent developments. The Deuteronomistic literature, rather than emerging from thin air, evolved from earlier stages and processes in Judah during the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E.

Evans (2017:19) suggests that in the absence of external information about the author(s) of a book, the only way to understand the author's intent is by analysing the text itself. By examining both the explicit statements and the omissions within the text, we can try to discern a consistent purpose. For instance, the absence or minimal mention of God in certain accounts can be as telling as the direct discussions about God's intentions. The role of the narrator is also of crucial importance, as their main input is often seen in the book's introductions and sometimes within the dialogue. Evans further observes that the book of Judges contains numerous recurring themes and ideas throughout its various accounts, showing a consistent approach. Broadly speaking, the book focuses on the lives of the Israelite tribes as Yahweh's people in the land granted to them by Yahweh. The relationship between these tribes and individuals with Yahweh is as pivotal in Judges as it is in Deuteronomy and other books considered part of the Deuteronomistic History.

3.3 Literary Shape

The core of the current Book of Judges has been repeatedly highlighted as part of the ongoing narrative known as Deuteronomistic History. Over time, various elements have been incorporated into this core, resulting in the book as it exists today. This integration has disrupted and fragmented the original continuity of the Deuteronomist's narrative, thus losing the comprehensive historical perspective initially presented. Initially classified as one of the Historical Books of the Old Testament, the second section of the Old Testament is also referred to by Jews as the Former Prophets. This designation includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, which were traditionally believed to have been authored by prophetic figures (Martin 1975:14).

Scholarly analysis of the book of Judges has consistently underscored its dual introduction: the first commencing with Joshua's death (1:1-2:5) and the second through the last moments of Joshua's life (2:6-3:6). A detailed examination of these introductions reveals that, thematically, the first introduction (1:1-2:5) aligns more closely with the book's concluding chapters (17-21), while the second introduction (2:6-3:6) is more connected to the central narratives about the judges/deliverers (3:7-16:31). The cyclical pattern within this core section distinguishes six major judges from six minor judges and Abimelech, indicating the use of diverse source materials in the book's central core (2:6-16:31). Additionally, the first introduction serves as a transition from the Book of Joshua, incorporating anticipatory material from that text (Boda 2012:49). Evans (2017:16) contends that there is broad consensus on the division of the book of Judges into three distinct sections: 1:1-3:6, 3:7-16:31, and 17:1-21:25. However, there is less agreement regarding the interrelationship of these sections or the passages within them. Some scholars argue that the book is a compilation of narratives lacking inherent cohesion. In contrast, others maintain that, despite being a collection of narratives from various sources, the book of Judges possesses a deliberate structure and purpose.

According to Andersson (2001:17), if several independent narratives are compiled, they do not automatically transform into a single, unified narrative, even if they share common patterns and motifs. Consequently, the individual story represents the primary level of meaning, with discrete elements understood as motifs within a literary construction. Therefore, the stories in the book of Judges are texts within a text, which accounts for the book's lack of a coherent ideology or morality. He further argues that the tension and ambiguities within the book, which undoubtedly exist cannot be resolved by classifying it as a literary construction. On the contrary, this explains and confirms the difficulties in the book that is, the inconsistent character of both the book and its narratives.

Building on the work of Boling, Webb (2012:8-9) argues that certain exploratory synchronic studies have suggested that an integrated reading of the text is possible and that the book possesses a deeper coherence than has been recognised by most historical-critical scholars. Younger, Jr. offers a nuanced perspective on the Book of Judges, emphasising its thematic coherence and moral messaging. However, Younger (2002:26) argues that the book conveys a coherent message about the consequences of disobedience to God, which leads to moral degeneration. This perspective is encapsulated in the phrase “the Canonisation of Israel,” a term used by Block (1999) to describe the central theme of the book. Younger (2002:26) also highlights that the selective presentation of historical events in Judges is designed to instruct readers on the repercussions of disobedience to God and his laws. This view contrasts with the more fragmented interpretations of other scholars, who see the book as a collection of independent narratives without inherent cohesion.

In addition to the perspectives of Younger and Block, Niditch (2008:1) asserts that the book of Judges holds significant historical value within the traditional narrative of Israelite history, spanning from the book of Genesis to the second book of Kings. This text documents the emergence of Israel, credited to the bravery of ancestral heroes and heroines during the era in which the book of Judges was written. The narrative recounts the promise made to the Israelites during their enslavement in Egypt, pledging the land of Israel as their heritage, a promise realised through divine

intervention. Beldman (2020:14) elaborates that the book of Judges focuses on the covenantal people of God, whose testimony and cultural identity were severely compromised by the religious and cultural influences of neighbouring nations. As a marginalised or minority group amidst powerful empires, the Israelites had the potential to experience extensive blessings through devout allegiance to Yahweh and his sovereign realm. However, their divided loyalties led to conflict, suffering, and devastation.

Beldman (2020:14) further contends that the book of Judges encapsulates a crucial period in Israel's history, highlighting the Israelites' settlement in the promised land and the formation of an emerging society. Interestingly, as the Israelites integrated into Canaan, Canaanite culture also began to influence the Israelite community, leading to unforeseen consequences. Modern interpreters of the book of Judges often distance themselves from the text due to the perplexing behaviour of God's people and the resultant violence. However, these aspects should enhance the scripture's relevance to contemporary followers of God rather than diminish it. The book of Judges offers a powerful admonition about the role of God's people and the detrimental impact of idolatry, which impedes their ability to fulfil their intended roles as agents of preservation and enlightenment.

3.3.1 The Socio-political and gender dynamics in the book of Judges: Analysing the role of social banditry and the treatment of women.

Biddle (2012:4) contends that the Old Testament Book of Judges poses substantial interpretive challenges due to its social, historical, and literary contexts. Addressing these complexities can enhance one's understanding and appreciation of the text. For modern Western readers, the primary difficulty in accepting Judges as authoritative scripture lies in its depictions of violence, patriarchy, and tribalism. This discomfort has led to claims that the Old Testament, particularly books like Judges, contains elements that starkly contrast with contemporary biblical morality, including instances of rape, murder, genocide, sexual immorality, child sacrifice, deceit, idolatry, and theft.

Conversely, Boda (2012:48) emphasises the importance of a sociological analysis of Israel's portrayal in Judges. The book reflects a pre-monarchical historical context, anticipates the monarchy as a preferable governance system, and acknowledges post-monarchical realities, including tensions between northern and southern royal claims. Unlike the book of Joshua, Judges shifts the narrative focus from tribes to local families and clans, which drive most of the plots and provide insights into success and failure. This shift also highlights a consistent lack of tribal cooperation, which was previously centred on religious unity. Although clans and tribes occasionally collaborate, it is typically on an ad hoc basis.

Biddle (2012:5-6) asserts that the book of Judges incorporates elements of its literary genre through depictions of violence, chaos, deceit, and notably, the abhorrent treatment of women. The protagonists in these narratives strive to benefit their people amidst struggles for territory and survival, these conditions reminiscent of the American frontier West. Christiansen, a scholar, likens Ehud, referred to as the "Loner," to the archetypal anti-hero of Western fiction. The Israelites, besieged by marauding Midianites and Amalekites (Judg 6:3-6), threatened by Moabite and Ammonite expansion (Judg 3:12-13; 11:3), and pressured by the Philistines (Judg 13-16), viewed these "social bandits" as crucial figures. Biddle (2012:6) further contends that the judges shared a common outsider status, apart from Deborah, who is not celebrated as a paragon of virtue or faith. These judges were not religious heroes; rather, they were diverse in their backgrounds, including non-Israelite (Othniel), left-handed (Ehud), female (Deborah), insignificant (Gideon), illegitimate (Jephthah), and philandering (Samson). It could be argued that the concept of social banditry introduces a more nuanced understanding of the judges' morality. Scholars view them as complex characters whose actions, though sometimes morally ambiguous, are driven by a commitment to justice for the marginalised, rather than being purely virtuous figures.

Hobsbawm (1969, cited in Niditch 2008:3) identifies social banditry as a phenomenon present in societies transitioning from tribal and kinship-based organisations to modern structures. Niditch (2008:3) posits that in the book of Judges, the judge characterised as a charismatic warrior chief empowered by God,

serves a crucial social and political role as a protector of the weak against the powerful. These judges, or “deliverers,” align closely with Hobsbawm’s concept of “social bandits” or “primitive rebels”, akin to the legendary figure of Robin Hood in Western folklore. Hobsbawm, as a social historian, connects narratives of social bandits to specific socio-political contexts. Although the rise of capitalism is not pertinent to biblical texts, the stories of the judges and early kings signify a pivotal shift from kinship-based group identity to allegiance to a state, exemplified by the monarchies of the Ancient Near East.

By reinterpreting the judges as social bandits, this perspective offers a more complex and socially grounded understanding of their roles and actions, challenging the traditional view of them as straightforward religious heroes. Traditional views often depict judges as heroic, divinely appointed leaders who embody religious and moral virtues. The concept of social banditry, however, frames them as marginal figures who operate outside the established social order, fighting for the oppressed and marginalised rather than upholding the status quo. Instead of being seen as upholders of divine law and order, judges viewed through the lens of social banditry, are seen as rebels who challenge existing power structures and fight against the interests of the establishment, aligning more with the role of social outlaws (Niditch 2008:3).

Evans (2017:34) observes that many readers are initially shocked when they encounter the book of Judges, as it depicts appalling behaviour, attitudes, and relationships. Young men from rural backgrounds often become bandits during times of transition and upheaval. These individuals are typically marginalised within their societies, sometimes victims of injustice, and inherently rebellious. They engage in acts of violence either in vengeance or self-defence and, in Israelite narratives, often employ trickery to achieve success. The judges and early kings, such as Saul and David, fit these criteria well, with Moses also potentially qualifying as a social bandit in the Exodus narratives. Gideon, Saul, and David all have agrarian or pastoral origins. Jephthah, an illegitimate son of a prostitute, is denied rights by his brothers, while Deborah stands out as a female leader in a male narrative. Ehud, a left-handed man in a society that favours the right hand, and

David, the youngest son and adversary of the Saulide establishment, are also considered marginal figures in ancient Israel. Samson, characterised by Hobsbawm as “the avenger,” exhibits uncontrolled violence, takes refuge in caves, kills with his bare hands, and serves as Israel’s weapon against the oppressive Philistines. The judges, along with Saul and David, confront Israel’s political and cultural enemies in warfare, thereby saving their people. This convergence of the judge, the epic hero, and the social bandit is crucial for understanding the narratives of Judges and their protagonists. The prominence of warfare in these stories is another key element in interpreting Judges as a foundational national narrative (Niditch 2008:4).

Niditch (2008:4-5) notes that a specific bardic ideology, distinct roles for women, and the interplay of themes of eroticism and death mark the warfare depicted in the tales of early Israelite heroes, including the biblical judges and early kings. Much of the conflict in Judges through second Samuel involves battles between Israelites and non-Israelite enemies. Still, internal strife among Israelites also occurs frequently over issues such as the distribution of booty, leadership rights, or perceived insults. Women play a significant role in the relationships between warriors, often serving as prizes of war and valuable items of exchange. Additionally, women engage in reconciliation processes, and their voices and experiences provide a critique of men’s wars. For instance, Michal is promised to David by her father, King Saul, as a reward for a hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Sam 18:25), and Achsah is given by Caleb to the hero Othniel (Judges 1:12-15). These women help forge relationships between men. However, in cases such as Saul and David, or Samson’s marriage to the Philistine woman from Timnah and his affair with Delilah, these relationships often lead to or reflect enmity rather than harmony. Furthermore, the narratives indicate that women often mediate the bonds between powerful men. Instead of fostering positive relationships, the treatment of women sometimes instigates conflict.

Evans (2017:35) highlights multiple instances in the book of Judges that suggest women’s rights, opinions, and welfare were disregarded in that society. For example, in chapter 11, Jephthah’s affection for his daughter is evident, yet he prioritises fulfilling his vow over her potential rights. Chapter 13 reflects the distrust

of women's testimony, as Samson's father prays for the angel to return so he, rather than his wife, can hear the message. Chapter 14 assumes that male family members will make decisions regarding the women associated with Samson. Evans (2017:36) argues that if one views the society depicted in Judges as an ideal, divinely ordered society, it implies that both Judges and, by extension, God endorse the mistreatment of women. However, the authors of Judges, while acknowledging and realistically portraying the prevailing attitudes towards women, often critique these attitudes. Sometimes, this critique appears incidental, but at other times, it seems intentional.

3.4 Synthesis

The book of Judges provides insight into the early history of Israel. This chapter focused on the historical context of this book. The Book of Judges is a collection of narratives derived from various sources. It is essential to distinguish whether discussions on dating and authorship pertain to the entire book or to specific narratives. The authorship of the book remains unknown. It appears to be a compilation of distinct segments detailing the various judges. While some narratives might have originated in early oral or written traditions, the text does not attribute these segments to specific sources. Despite considerable efforts by modern scholars to trace these origins, their success has been limited. When examined from a literary perspective rather than a historical one, it becomes essential to investigate the origins of these sections, and the methods and individuals involved in their compilation. The stylistic variations among the sections suggest multiple sources. The book is part of a larger collection, which includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, with Deuteronomy serving as a preface. This collection is recognised as a cohesive historical work, known as the Deuteronomistic History; and the finalised compilation is around 550 B.C. It is likely that wisdom traditions influenced Deuteronomy. According to Knauf (2019:213), the book of Judges has a longer “gestation period” than Joshua, indicating a more extended development over time. He proposes that half of the historical memory in Judges originates from the early Persian period (500-400 B.C.E.), which he considers the “present” of the

book's narrative. An additional 25% is attributed to the 8th - 6th centuries B.C.E., with less contribution from the 10th and 9th centuries B.C.E. Knauf dates the different narratives.

Amit (2009:299) argues that the Book of Judges should be dated to the mid-6th century B.C.E., after the destruction of Josiah, rather than the late 7th century B.C.E., as proposed by Cross and his followers. If Judges is Deuteronomistic, it should display fundamental concepts and ideologies typical of Deuteronomistic beliefs and practices, and its language and style should mirror the Deuteronomistic worldview. This analysis contributes to the wider discussion on the historical and theological context of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Evans (2017:19) suggests that understanding a book's author's intent requires analysing the text itself, examining both explicit statements and omissions. The narrator's role is crucial, as their input is often seen in the book's introductions and dialogue. The book of Judges contains numerous recurring themes and ideas, showing a consistent approach. The book focuses on the lives of Israelite tribes as Yahweh's people in the land granted to them, with the relationship between tribes and Yahweh being as pivotal in Judges as it is in Deuteronomy and other Deuteronomistic History books. The book poses substantial interpretive challenges due to its social, historical, and literary contexts. Addressing these complexities can enhance one's understanding and appreciation of the text.

The Book of Judges, a central part of Deuteronomistic History, has evolved over time with various elements incorporated into its core narrative. It contains elements that starkly contrast with contemporary biblical morality, including instances of rape, murder, genocide, sexual immorality, child sacrifice, deceit, idolatry, and theft. Boda (2012:48) emphasises the importance of a sociological analysis of Israel's portrayal in Judges. The book portrays a society where women's rights, opinions, and welfare are often disregarded. There are instances where Jephthah prioritises fulfilling his vow over his daughter's rights, distrust of women's testimony, and male family members making decisions about women. By viewing the society as an ideal,

divinely ordered one implies that both Judges and God endorse mistreatment of women. However, the authors of Judges, while acknowledging and realistically portraying the prevailing attitudes towards women, often critique these attitudes. Sometimes, this critique appears incidental, but at other times, it seems intentional.

After the discussion on the historical context of the book of Judges the focus will move to a discussion of the foreign women. In the next chapter this concept will be discussed. An overview will be given of foreign women in the Old Testament and then foreign women in Proverbs 1-9 will be examined in more detail.

Chapter 4: Foreign Women

4.1 Introduction

Foreign women in the Old Testament often serve as pivotal figures whose stories intersect with the broader narrative of Israel's history and identity. These women, who come from outside the Israelite community, are frequently portrayed in ways that reflect the complexities of Israel's interactions with surrounding nations. Their narratives can be seen as both a reflection of and a commentary on the socio-political and religious dynamics of the time. For instance, figures such as Ruth, the Moabite, and Rahab, the Canaanite, are depicted in ways that challenge and expand the understanding of what it means to be part of the people of God. As Irene Nowell notes, "The women in the Old Testament, too long invisible, have rich stories that are vital to the ongoing revelation of God's relationship with a covenant people" (Nowell 1997:1).

The portrayal of foreign women in the Old Testament is a complex and multifaceted subject that provides valuable insights into the cultural, social, and theological contexts of ancient Israel. Weiss (2020:171-172) points out that the representation of women in the Bible is often limited, with female characters frequently portrayed as objects of male desire and valued primarily for their reproductive roles. Nevertheless, the Bible contains various narratives that challenge patriarchal norms, including those of biblical seductresses who employ their feminine allure to influence powerful men. These women often compromise their virtue by engaging in sexually provocative actions, thereby subordinating their targets to achieve their goals. While figures such as Potiphar's wife, who attempts to seduce Joseph, and Delilah, who seduces Samson, are depicted negatively for diverting biblical heroes from their missions, other female characters are commended for using their sexuality to accomplish their aims. Despite receiving biblical praise, the morally ambiguous behaviour of these seductresses, some of whom are married, remains a point of contention.

By examining the roles and representations of foreign women in the Old Testament's historical narratives and wisdom literature, this chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of their significance. It will explore how these depictions reflect the biblical authors' broader theological and ethical concerns and what they reveal about the evolving identity of the Israelite community. Through this analysis, we can gain deeper insights into how the Old Testament engages with themes of otherness, inclusion, and the pursuit of wisdom. Consequently, this chapter aims to discuss the roles and representations of foreign women in the Old Testament. Moreover, it will delve into the concept of foreign women in the wisdom literature of Proverbs 1-9 and examine how these texts can enhance our understanding of Delilah's character in Judges 16.

4.2 Foreign Women in the Old Testament

According to Yee (2018:1), the Bible is a foundational text, not only for the religious communities of Jews and Christians but particularly for its influence in the formation and perpetuation of certain gender relations that privileged men and disenfranchised women. Fisher (2019:109) argues that the Old Testament presents Israel with a mixed attitude toward foreigners, highlighting a separation in Israel's history. While Israel is depicted as a holy nation that should remain distinct from foreign nations, there are also laws in place to protect foreigners, and intermarriage is a common practice. The patriarchal narratives illustrate men marrying both within their extended families and beyond the conventional boundaries of nationhood.

Crowell (2013:1-2) explains that the Deuteronomistic History is abundant with narratives featuring numerous foreign women. Over the past thirty years, scholars have shown a heightened interest in the portrayal of women within biblical texts. This scholarly endeavour has significantly enhanced our comprehension of women's societal roles in ancient Israel and the way the male authors of the Hebrew Bible depict them. These depictions not only highlight women's influence and prominence but also reveal the underlying patriarchal and biased perspectives of the authors. Furthermore, foreign women hold considerable significance in ancient

Hebrew texts, particularly within the Deuteronomistic History. However, the specific classifications and patterns of these portrayals have rarely been the focus of historical research. The depiction of these women is crucial to the historical narratives and provides profound insights into the belief systems of the authors and the societal norms of the time. Fisher (2019:109) discusses how foreign women became wives and concubines in Israel, mentioning Abraham's relationships with Hagar, an Egyptian slave (Gen 16:21; 25:12), and Keturah (Gen 25:1.4). Esau's marriage to two Hittite women caused distress for his parents (Gen 26:34-35), and their foreignness introduced conflict within the family. Fisher (2019:109) further argues that foreign women came from diverse social backgrounds and were integrated into society, albeit often with a lower social status that extended to their children. Consequently, Abraham's offspring from his foreign wives inherited less than Isaac (Gen 25:6).

Crowell (2013:2) underlines a discernible pattern in how these authors viewed foreign women. Their narrative construction of these characters not only reflects their own biases but also contributes to a broader understanding of women's depictions in historical texts. This postcolonial viewpoint enriches our comprehension of the portrayal of women, revealing the authors deliberate literary strategies. Crowell's analysis offers a fascinating perspective on the Deuteronomistic History, highlighting the "colonial" complexities within it. The authors' intentions are brought to light, showing their tendency to depict foreign women either as individuals who yield to the Israelites or as temptresses. This portrayal is scrutinised through the modern lens of postcolonial theory, which examines the representation of women in literary works after colonialism.

4.2.1 Patriarchal narratives: The role of foreign women in biblical texts

A salient feature of both colonial and postcolonial discourse in the contemporary period is the conspicuous scarcity of female perspectives (Crowell 2013:4). The historical narratives are predominantly depicted as masculine theatrics, where women are often generalised, stereotyped, and presented as symbols rather than

dynamic participants. Women, when they do feature, are usually in the domestic sphere; roles of national importance and heroism are primarily allocated to men. When writers do assign some form of agency to women, constructing them as proactive characters who contribute to the colonial or postcolonial shaping of history, these instances provide remarkable insights into the authors' patriarchal ideology. This drama, dominated and enacted by males, perpetuates and strengthens the prevailing structures to validate the existing social order. Kočí (2014:227) indicates that the reader should consider the role of time and tradition in interpreting biblical texts, particularly in postmodern biblical hermeneutics. This approach is instrumental in re-evaluating the socio-economic conditions of foreign women, as it allows for a re-reading of the text's sensitivity to the period's historical and cultural nuances. Similarly, Exum's seminal 1996 work, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representation of Biblical Women*, provides a critical analysis of the artistic and cultural depictions of women in biblical narratives, shedding light on their socio-economic roles and the power dynamics at play.

Crowell (2013:6) highlights the importance of understanding these portrayals within their historical context. He argues that the Deuteronomistic History was written during a time of significant social and political upheaval, and the depiction of foreign women reflects the anxieties and concerns of the Israelite society. The fear of cultural and religious contamination is a recurring theme, and foreign women become scapegoats for these fears. Crowell (2013:7) also points out the role of power in these portrayals. He notes that the Deuteronomistic History authors use the depiction of foreign women to reinforce the power dynamics between Israel and its neighbours. By portraying foreign women as dangerous and seductive, the Deuteronomistic History authors justify the exclusion and subjugation of these women and, by extension, their cultures. This serves to reinforce the boundaries between Israel and the "other," maintaining the purity and superiority of the Israelite identity.

Ben Zvi (2014:20) argues that being a historian of ancient Israel, his intentions are not to contribute to the discussion of disciplinary, explicit, or implicit theoretical understandings of othering evidenced in today's critical literature. However, his

contribution to the anthology explores the dynamics of ‘othering’, ‘selfing’, ‘boundarying’, and ‘cross-boundarying’, underscoring the role of socially shared memories in shaping perceptions of the self and the ‘other’. This theoretical framework is pivotal for understanding the socio-economic status of foreign women, as it highlights the boundaries constructed by and within the Israelite society (Ben Zvi, 2014:21). Mokoena (2022:1) further enriches this discourse by examining the practices of radical refusal in biblical feminist interpretation, offering a contemporary lens through which to view these ancient narratives. Mokoena’s insights into the intersectionality of race, gender, and scripture provide a critical perspective on the lived experiences of foreign women during this period. Since the early 1980^s, when Masenya (2014:189) introduced ‘gender-identified biblical frameworks’, there has been a significant shift, described as an epistemic rupture or disobedience. Numerous analytical tools and hermeneutical frameworks have since been developed. Scholars from marginalised areas of biblical studies have emerged, refusing to remain passive recipients of knowledge created about them without their involvement. They have embraced the task of questioning and disrupting established norms with enthusiasm.

Esther Fuchs, in her scholarly work *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, writes to expose the link between the politics of male domination and the representation of women in the Old Testament. She approaches the texts through a cultural-literary approach; she argues that men author the text in its literary form. Therefore, the Bible is androcentric or, rather, male centred. Fuchs highlights that most tales revolve around male characters. The large segments of the narrative portion of the Bible from Genesis to 2 Kings focus on the stories of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, the national leaders Moses and Joshua, the judges, the early prophets Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, and the kings Saul and David. No amount of trotting out exceptional female figures, such as Deborah the judge and Miriam the prophet, should blind us to the overwhelming presentation of women as male-dependent and male-related cyphers who appear as secondary characters in a male drama. No amount of searching for prebiblical or extrabiblical sources and traditions can mitigate the fact that in its final

presentation, the biblical text reduces women to auxiliary roles, suppresses their voices, and minimises their national and religious significance (Fuchs 2000:11).

The motif of foreign women is directly referenced in the Old Testament's Wisdom literature, specifically in Proverbs 22:14; 23:26-28 and Ecclesiastes 7:26. Proverbs 22:14 is part of the collection titled "Proverbs of Solomon". Tan (2004:95) observes that this literature differs significantly in form and construction from the material in Proverbs 1-9. Tan (2004:96) further notes that if this saying was composed after Proverbs 1-9, it appears to have altered the motif of the foreign woman: she is now depicted as a trap rather than a lure, serving as a punishment rather than a cause of sin. Conversely, if it had been composed earlier, it might have provided a foundation for the more elaborate imagery in Proverbs 1-9. Birdsong et al. (2023:2-3) argue that gender theory, like intertextuality, has permeated biblical studies, offering new perspectives to reinterpret ancient texts in a postmodern context. While feminism previously liberated female characters from patriarchal authorship and androcentric interpretation, gender studies extend this reassessment to all genders, exploring their fluidity and the complex historical and cultural realities that shaped them.

4.2.2 Power dynamics and cultural hybridity

In the Deuteronomistic narrative, Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, is portrayed as the primary instigator who leads Ahab astray into idolatry, ultimately contributing to the downfall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Deuteronomists characterise Jezebel not merely as a hypersexualised seductress but rather as a power-driven foreign royal. However, elements of seduction are hinted at towards the end of her life. Jezebel stands out as a prominent example in the Deuteronomistic History of a foreign woman who not only preserves her native culture within Israel but also actively promotes the worship of foreign deities and the assimilation of foreign values (Crowell 2013:12).

According to the Deuteronomists, Jezebel engages in deceit, murder, and direct opposition to the Yahwistic religious establishment. She epitomises the divine

warning in Deuteronomy 7:1-5, which cautions against foreign women who might lead the people astray and challenge the authority of the male king (Crowell 2013:13). Crowell (2013:13) introduces the concept of “hybridity,” explaining that foreign women in the Deuteronomistic History often embody a form of cultural and religious hybridity that challenges the purity and identity of Israel. This hybridity is perceived as a threat to the social and religious order, leading to the demonisation of these women. For instance, figures like Rahab and Jezebel are depicted not only as foreign but also as seductresses who lead Israel astray. Their foreignness is intertwined with their sexuality, making them potent symbols of the dangers of cultural and religious mixing. In the context of the Old Testament, foreign women such as Ruth and Tamar serve as pivotal figures whose narratives complicate the traditional patriarchal framework. Their stories not only illustrate the intersection of gender and ethnicity but also challenge the prevailing norms of their societies. For instance, Ruth's loyalty and agency in the face of adversity subvert the expectations placed upon her as a foreign woman, showcasing a form of hybridity that blends her Moabite identity with the Israelite community (Crowell 2013:15-16).

According to Lovelace (2018:88), Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that the formation of national identity typically incorporates distinct ideas of both masculinity and femininity. The book of Judges provides numerous male and female characters, offering a rich source for examining gender roles during the settlement period. Notably, Judges features more named and unnamed female characters than any other book in the Hebrew Bible. However, this abundance of female characters is not a cause for celebration, as they often face sacrifice, abduction, rape, and murder. Additionally, the portrayal of gender and ethnicity in Judges frequently depicts foreign men as feminised and foreign women as masculinised. Washington (1997:346) points out that males are inherently the targets of warfare's violence, while females are its victims. Moreover, Yee (1993 cited in Lovelace 2018:89) and other scholars indicate that, in a paradoxical twist, these narratives frequently depict women as instruments through which men are emasculated or dishonoured.

According to Fuchs (2000:11-12), most stories displaying women as subordinate, insignificant and morally flawed have been taken in stride. Some are even

historicised, thus exonerating the biblical authors of the responsibility that is placed on an ancient society that exists no more. Some argue that the inferior status of women in Israelite society is post-monarchic, and some argue that women wielded power in ancient Israel. If indeed women played a crucial role in early Israelite history, if there were female-centred institutions and communities as some would have it, the question we face is even more serious: why was this role distorted, suppressed, obscured and erased? Fuchs's (2000:12) argument is not that there is no correlation between the Bible's literary representation of women and their historical oppression in ancient Israel. Rather, it is that patriarchy, as the fundamental social system of ancient Israel, is justified, universalised, and naturalised in the biblical text. The argument brought forth by Fuchs is that the Bible does not merely project a male consciousness, but that it promotes a male-supremacist social and cognitive system.

From a "womanist" viewpoint, Lovelace (2018:90) notes that Sisera's character has not been portrayed as the hyper-masculinised black male rapist, nor has Yael been depicted as the hypersexualised black female seductress, which are common racial and gender stereotypes in the US public discourse. This is likely because Sisera does not pose a sexual threat to the purity of an Israelite woman. Yael, unlike Jezebel, is seen as a "good" foreign woman and thus avoids racialisation. However, she is still often sexualised and depicted as a seductress. Furthermore, Sisera is doubly marginalised by being killed by Yael. Some scholars suggest that the manner of his death, with Yael using a tent peg, has been sexualised as a phallic symbol, casting Yael in the male role of rapist and feminising Sisera. Furthermore, scholars like Klein (1988:99), argue that Deuteronomists blame the actions of men like Abimelech and Jephthah on their fathers' illicit sexual relations: Whether with foreign women (Gideon's concubine) or not (the harlot-mother of Jephthah), non-familial Israelite proliferation is shown as potentially destructive.

The narratives in the book of Judges critique, comment on, and reinterpret other texts within the biblical canon. These interplays often challenge traditional gender roles, disrupting stereotypical binaries and creating a form of gender chaos. The treatment of women in Judges reflects the overall trajectory of the book, which

descends into disorder. Initially, Judges begins with a positive campaign led by the tribe of Judah under Yahweh's command (Birdsong et al 2023:1). The first female character, Achsah, is portrayed as a strong and assertive woman who secures land as her inheritance, serving as a model for all Israel. She is depicted as knowing what she wants and achieving it. However, by the book's conclusion, Israel is in turmoil, and women are forcibly taken from their homes, as exemplified by the unnamed concubine in Judges 19, who is taken from her father's house in Bethlehem and gang-raped by Benjaminites in a foreign city (Birdsong et al. 2023:1).

4.3 The concept of “Foreign Women” in Proverbs 1-9

The depiction of the foreign woman in Proverbs 1-9 is frequently linked to notions of peril and moral decay. According to Baumann (2014:59), the book of Proverbs is presented as containing some of the oldest wisdom texts in the Bible, with chapters 1-9 serving as an introduction where “Wisdom” is frequently mentioned. However, not all references denote personified Wisdom, with key texts where she speaks directly being Prov 1:20–33, Prov 8, and Prov 9:1–9. Baumann (2014:60) highlights that feminist exegetical research predominantly views personified Wisdom in these chapters as a poetic personification rather than a divine hypostasis or a reference to ancient goddesses. The introduction to Proverbs, created by the urban upper class of the postexilic era, addresses religious and ideological questions rather than economic issues, focusing on defining proper behaviour for the Israelite community. The figure of the “strange woman” serves as the negative counterpart to personified Wisdom, embodying more concrete characteristics of real women. This juxtaposition in Proverbs 1-9 contrasts the negatively perceived behaviour of actual women with the idealised, abstract figure of Wisdom, who lacks the tangible traits of real women. This contrast underscores the moral and ideological teachings aimed at guiding the community's behaviour and identity. Maier (2014:77) focuses on the interpretation of numerous female figures in the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, such as Proverbs and Job. She addresses the tendency of Wisdom literature to create types of human characters, which she refers to as “cultural stereotypes.”

Maier (2014:78) further indicates that the term stereotype was introduced into social discourse by journalist Walter Lippmann, who defined it as an “ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world” that aligns with our habits, tastes, capacities, comforts, and hopes. She (Maier) highlights that Lippmann argues that people rely on stereotypes to navigate their complex world. Psychologically, building stereotypes is seen as a coping strategy that helps humans orient themselves amidst conflicting perceptions and anxieties. However, Maier (2014:78) then refers to Johnny Miles ³who highlights the risk of “othering” inherent in stereotyping, which involves negatively distinguishing individuals or groups from oneself. This process reduces the uniqueness and distinctiveness of individuals by merging their behaviours or habits into a homogeneous evaluation.

Scholars such as Camp (1985:45) have explored how these texts mirror societal fears regarding foreign influence and the safeguarding of cultural identity. Camp further posits that the foreign woman in Proverbs symbolises the enticing allure of foreign customs and beliefs, posing a threat to the moral integrity of Israelite youth. This representation highlights the necessity of upholding cultural and religious purity amidst external influences. In Proverbs 1-9, the foreign woman is often utilised as an instructional trick to convey moral teachings. Fox (2000:112) contends that these passages use the figure of the foreign woman to illustrate the repercussions of deviating from the path of wisdom. Fox asserts that the foreign woman personifies the perils of folly and the seductive nature of sin, serving as a warning to the young men addressed in the text. This interpretation underscores the foreign woman’s educational role in reinforcing the wisdom traditions, principles, and teachings.

Wurtzel (2012:45) presents a thought-provoking interpretation of women in the Bible, arguing that although they are often denied explicit acknowledgement and status, they skilfully wielded influence and transformed narratives through subversive tactics. She contends that these women, frequently objectified and portrayed merely as sexual objects, adeptly navigated the patriarchal limitations of their society with intelligence and strategic insight. By “pilfering” the spotlight

³ Johnny Miles, *Constructing the Other in Ancient Israel and the USA* (The Bible in the Modern World 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 30– 33.

without consequence, they succeeded in asserting their presence and making an impact within biblical narratives. Wurtzel's (2012:45) claim that biblical women "snuck in, serpentine, and stole the plot" highlights their capacity to challenge conventional gender roles and expectations. This viewpoint is further illustrated by the provocative suggestion that Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden stemmed from a desire for attention, emphasising the intricate relationships among power, gender, and agency. Through this context, Wurtzel demonstrates how these women, including notable figures like Delilah, utilised their marginalised status to manipulate and redefine their narratives, thereby contesting and reshaping the power dynamics prevalent in a male-dominated society.

The book of Proverbs, when considered in its entirety, centres around a principal theme amidst its varied maxims and observations. In this theme, seldom addressed in other Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature, wisdom is not merely wise behaviour or teachings, but an intellectual power, encompassing both knowledge and understanding. The book of Proverbs emphasises not only actions but also the acquisition of knowledge. This focus, more than the specific teachings, is crucial for comprehending the unique message and purpose of Israelite wisdom literature (Fox 1997:613). Furthermore, this emphasis on wisdom is pervasive throughout the book, often so ingrained that it may go unnoticed. The most profound contemplation of wisdom is found in chapters 1-9, which serve as a hermeneutical introduction to the rest of the text. Even in the text's preserved form, the compositional history remains evident, as the voices do not completely merge but are discernible in their distinctiveness (Fox 1997:613).

Fox (1997:613-614) suggests that for the literary analysis of Proverbs 1-9, it is adequate to differentiate between two primary strata. He identifies these strata as ten lectures and five interludes. The ten lectures, as defined by Fox, include:

- 1:8-19 The seductive gang
- 2:1-22 The path to wisdom
- 3:1-12 The wisdom of piety

- 3:21-35 Winning favour with God and man
- 4:1-9 Loving wisdom; hating evil
- 4:10-19 The right path
- 4:20-27 The straight path
- 5:1-23 The promiscuous woman
- 6:20-35 The promiscuous woman
- 7:1-27 The promiscuous woman

The five interludes are

- 1:20-33 Lady Wisdom's condemnation of fools
- 3:13-20 The praise of wisdom
- 6:1-19 Four epigrams on various follies and evils
- 8:1-36 Lady Wisdom's self-praise
- 9:1-18 Invitations from Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly respectively

Fox (1997:614) refers to these ten units as lectures to underscore their instructional nature, which is also known as discourses or instructions. These lectures are designed as father-to-son teachings, each developing a central theme within a tripartite structure.

According to Fox (1997:616), the ten lectures could alternatively be the work of a single author, composed as a cohesive unit. This unit might have been intended either as an independent book or as an introduction to the rest of the book of Proverbs. The author, or the literary tradition behind him, incorporated definitive elements of the ancient instructional genre into each literary unit, ensuring that each lecture stands as a complete instruction. This reformulation, which consistently emphasises the importance of heeding wisdom and its benefits, reinforces the

author's teachings on the nature of wisdom. However, Fox notes that the interludes represent a later stratum inserted into the series of lectures.

The concept of foreignness in the book of Proverbs has not been sufficiently explored. Fisher (2019:111) notes that feminist scholars have given it more attention, particularly through the comprehensive analysis by Nam Hoon Tan (2004). Tan examines the origins and evolution of the foreign woman in Proverbs 1-9, situating her within the broader framework of wisdom literature. The terminology for foreign women is prevalent throughout the text, with terms such as נְקִימָה, זָרָה, and זֹנָה carrying negative connotations. Conversely, the woman of substance (אִשְׁת־חַיִל 12:4; 31:10) is portrayed positively and is also linked to the concept of foreignness. For instructional purposes, the abstract notions of wisdom and folly, which partially relate to foreignness, are personified as Lady Wisdom (9:1-12) and Lady Folly (9:13-18). Additionally, Tan (2004:1) highlights that previous scholarship has offered various interpretations of this woman, with the most persistent views being that she is an adulteress and a social outsider, characterised by promiscuity. While it is recognised that in instances like Ruth 2:10 and 1 Kings 11:1,8, the feminine form of the term refers to a foreign woman or foreign wife, the same term in Proverbs 1-9 is generally interpreted differently. This discrepancy raises lexicographical questions about the term's semantic range and historical questions about its usage. Some recent scholars suggest that Proverbs 1-9, likely a product of the post-exilic period, reflects the significant issue of intermarriage central to Ezra-Nehemiah and other texts. It is puzzling how the same term could have such divergent meanings in the same era, and whether the authors or readers of Proverbs 1-9 could have separated the figure in the text from such a prominent contemporary issue.

Fisher (2019:111) illustrates the concepts of wisdom and folly through the depiction of two contrasting women: Lady Wisdom, representing a man's wife, and Lady Folly, representing another man's wife. The former is highly esteemed and likened to metaphors such as a doe, deer, and cistern (5:15-19). In contrast, the strange woman, associated with Lady Folly, uses seductive words that are as bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a two-edged sword (5:3-6). The severe warnings

against her include imagery of death and *Sheol*, losing the life path, and following a crooked way. These warnings also have economic repercussions, suggesting that one's wealth and strength could be lost to strange and foreign individuals (5:10). Consequently, the group to which this woman belongs is stigmatised.

4.3.1 Foreign and strange stereotypes in the depiction of the woman in biblical literature

Tan (2004:79) contends that Proverbs 5:3, which initially refers to the woman, presents a more detailed warning about the foreign woman's speech, likely contrasting poetically with the father's advice in verse 2 to guard one's lips with knowledge. These verses highlight the contrast between the initial allure of the foreign woman's words, described as "dripping honey" and "smooth as oil" (v. 3), and their eventual bitterness and sharpness, likened to wormwood and a two-edged sword (v. 4). Thus, the father acknowledges that while the foreign woman may initially gratify, she ultimately brings harm and regret.

Dietrich (2019:125) suggests that the depiction of the strange woman in Proverbs 1-9 should be viewed within the context of the post-exilic issue of mixed marriages. The author(s) of Proverbs 1-9 was likely familiar with texts on mixed marriages from both the Pentateuch and Ezra-Nehemiah. Additionally, Tan (2004:10) notes that scholars like Leo Perdue link the context of Proverbs 1-9 with that of Ezra-Nehemiah, arguing that the teachings favour the hierocratic party. Perdue interprets the foreign woman in various ways across different passages: in Proverbs 2:16-18, she symbolises extra-Israelite culture and religion; in Proverbs 5:3-20, she is depicted as a prostitute, adulteress, fertility priestess, foreign goddess, and the abstract notion of folly, possibly warning against any association with foreigners; in Proverbs 6:20-35, she is the adulteress and another man's wife; and in Proverbs 7:6-27, she is the fertility priestess or foreign goddess, representing foreign religion and culture. Unlike in Ezra-Nehemiah, Dietrich (2019:126) indicates that the primary concern in Proverbs 1-9 is not mixed marriage but the condemnation of the "strange woman." This figure, prominent in Proverbs 2-7, is contextualised by two other

negative characters: the “manly sinners” in chapter one and “Lady Folly” in chapter nine. Although these figures are distinct from the strange woman, they share similar negative attributes. The depiction of the strange woman is complex and ambiguous, prompting various scholarly interpretations. Questions about her identity include whether she is ethnically foreign, a follower of a foreign deity or philosophy, a foreign goddess, a prostitute (potentially a cult prostitute), a social outsider, or simply another man’s wife. This ambiguity invites multiple hypotheses, highlighting the multifaceted and enigmatic nature of the strange woman in the biblical narrative.

Tan (2004:86-87) asserts that Proverbs 7:1-5 adheres to the common pattern in chapters 1-9, beginning with a general admonition before presenting a specific warning. The son is encouraged to cultivate a relationship with wisdom as if she were an intimate female friend or sister, to shield himself from the foreign woman, who presents a more perilous relationship. Despite her bold and explicitly attractive appearance and behaviour, her primary means of seduction remains her “smooth speech.” Interestingly, her speech starts with religious references to her peace offerings and vows, though the exact significance of this is unclear. Some commentators suggest that her vows are yet to be fulfilled.

Lady Folly is found in Proverbs 2:16-19, 5:1-17, 6:25-33, 7:5-27, and 9:13-18. The concept of the negative feminine is reflected in these passages. She is depicted as an adulteress (2:16; 5:3) who uses words to entice people (2:16); she is resentful and dangerous (5:4); she brings about death and *Sheol* (2:18; 5:5); her actions are irresponsible and lead to instability (5:6); she results in the loss of one's life (5:9-10). She uses her eyes and tongue to entice and flirt (6:24-25). The portrayal of the feminine figure in Proverbs 7 is highly sensuous and sexualized. A prostitute (7:10), she hides around the streets (7:11), kisses him (7:12), tells him how she found him (7:15), makes her bed for him (7:16-17), and encourages him to share and enjoy it with her (7:18) (Geyser-Fouché 2019:340-341).

In Proverbs 9, both Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly are present. Lady Folly in Proverbs 9:13-18 embodies the foreign woman, symbolising the seduction of foreign religion and culture. She is also depicted as the antithesis of Lady Wisdom (Prov 9:1-12). Lady Wisdom (9:1-6) built a house with seven pillars and prepared a feast. She is

an influential woman with servants which she sends out to call her guests. Lady Folly is set against her (9:13-18). She is a loud and reckless person who sits by her door and calls out to everyone who passes. The call is the same (9:4 and 9:16) but their messages are different. Wisdom offers refreshments but also gives instructions about how to live with insight (9:6-12). Folly offers no physical refreshments, although she refers to stolen water and bread eaten in secret. Persons who succumb to her temptation experience adversity (9:18), versus the better consequences of wisdom (9:11-12). The core of the chapter is found in the middle of wisdom's instructions (9:10). It is the refrain of Proverbs: Wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord (cf. Geysers-Fouché 2019:340-341).

Fisher (2019:113) posits that the foreign and strange woman is not an individual but a symbolic representation of the negative aspects of womanhood to be avoided. She embodies the concept of an enemy designed to evoke negativity, with traits fluctuating between anthropological reality and a demonic counter world. Maier (1995, cited in Fisher 2019:113) interprets this woman as a follower of a foreign cult, an adulteress, a societal outsider, an enchantress, a poetic personification, and a multifaceted literary symbol. In her study, she views the strange woman in three ways: as the stereotypical adulteress, the counter-figure to Lady Wisdom, and a parallel to wicked men. Fisher (2019:113) notes that the various terms used form a cluster depicting a typology of stereotypical negative womanhood, representing concepts of Lady Folly.

The powerful yet insidious symbol of a woman seducing a man into sin, leading to dire consequences, has been a recurring theme in Western literature since Eve gave the fateful fruit to Adam. Ancient and modern authors, often attribute the source of seduction to the woman's voice, with her enchanting words leading the innocent man to his downfall. This is exemplified by the fates of those who succumbed to the Sirens and the Lorelei (Yee 1995:110). Additionally, Fisher (2019:113-114) views the narrative in Proverbs 7:6-23 as portraying a hostile image of the woman. She is depicted as a temptress who seduces a young man (7:13-20) with her words, leading him to his doom "like an ox going to the slaughter, like a stag stepping into a noose" (7:21-23). Her seductive power is linked to her

appearance, speech, actions, and lodging. The description is detailed yet non-specific, with no dates or places identified, and her beauty is not described in detail, remaining intentionally vague and multifaceted. This incomplete portrayal allows the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps.

However, it is the beauty of the woman that captures the man. The wisdom teacher adds to this psychological insight the following warning: "Do not desire her beauty in your heart and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes" (6:25). There is no absolute description of beauty. Beauty is shaped by cultural conventions; but ultimately, the viewer, in this instance the young man, perceives beauty in the woman as an effect of the impression she has made on him (Fisher 2019:114). Furthermore, the foreign woman is described as someone with a smooth tongue. Her mouth has the double function of delivering speech and kisses. The fictive quote of her words by the teacher delivers a good example (7:14-20) of her seductive speech. She plays with the erotic imagination of the young man. Her speech is filled with stereotypes attributed to a prostitute. She describes the place of lovemaking in words aimed to charm and persuade the young man. She plays down the risk by stating that her husband is away, and using deceptive words (7:5), she promises security for the illicit act and hence convinces the man by the sheer eroticism thereof (Fisher 2019:114).

In certain contexts, Weiss (2020:173) suggests that actions that would typically be considered immoral due to sexual taboos and societal values may be deemed justifiable. For example, the principle of social preservation and continuity holds paramount importance in biblical society and can legitimise strategies that might otherwise be seen as suboptimal. Additionally, John Barton, in *Ethics and the Old Testament*, posits that the ethics presented in narrative texts can diverge from explicit legal or wisdom teachings, such as those found in Proverbs 7:6-27. He references specific situations, like the potential defeat of the Israelites in the books of Esther and Judges, to justify behaviours that would otherwise result in condemnation or even the death penalty, particularly in cases of adultery.

In Ancient Near Eastern culture, women were legally subordinate to males both within the family and in the public sphere. Similarly, women in biblical literature were

subordinate to men in terms of social standing and civil rights. Consequently, they are not portrayed as politically significant participants in the Bible's power struggles but are primarily confined to domestic and biological-social roles (Weiss 2020:174). However, in several isolated narratives, biblical women assume prominent positions by utilising their feminine attributes to achieve significant goals. Given their status within a gendered social framework, biblical women may have been perceived as lacking the ability to manipulate situations through other means, necessitating the use of their feminine wiles to exert control. Rather than viewing biblical women as victims within a patriarchal society, many feminist scholars regard them as active agents who transform societal order (Weiss 2020:174).

Miles (2004:96) highlights that the central theme of Proverbs 1-9 is the pronounced contrast between the allegorical figures of Lady Folly and Lady Wisdom. This contrast is intricately developed through the depiction of Folly as the embodiment of foolishness, intentionally set against Wisdom. Folly's characterisation is complex, emphasising her loudness, naivete, and ignorance. These attributes are not merely surface level but carry deep symbolic meaning. Folly's loudness is portrayed as unruly and undignified, sharply contrasting with Wisdom's dignified declarations. This loudness recalls earlier portrayals of Folly, reinforcing her symbolic role. Additionally, Folly's naivete highlights her gullibility, ironically paired with her persuasive and seductive nature. This duality accentuates the deceptive charm of Folly, who, despite her persuasive skills, only attracts those equally foolish. Her ignorance, another significant trait, is depicted as a lack of both knowledge and concern for others, further differentiating her from Wisdom. Moreover, Miles (2004:96-97) explores the implications of Folly's traits and behaviours in greater depth. Unlike Wisdom, who diligently constructs her house and prepares her banquet, Folly's actions are characterised by laziness and a lack of preparation. This contrast underscores Folly's inherent destructiveness, as she does not engage in constructive activities like Wisdom. The effort and care that Wisdom invests in her endeavours starkly contrast with Folly's indolence, highlighting the futility and destructiveness of foolishness. Moreover, the public venues chosen by both women for their invitations symbolise their influence and reach. Despite often appearing in

the same locations, the proximity of Folly and Wisdom serves to emphasise their fundamental differences. Folly's presence at the city heights, alongside Wisdom, underscores the pervasive nature of foolishness and its potential to mislead those within its sphere of influence. Through these contrasts, Miles (2004:96-97) illustrates the profound differences between Folly and Wisdom, emphasising the consequences of embracing foolishness over wisdom.

According to Fontaine (2002:42) the 'loose woman' and 'adulteresses' are depicted as central concerns for the sages, representing the opposite of the 'reliable wife' and 'nurturing mother'. These women embody traits that male society deems unacceptable, and their depiction is marked by xenophobic distrust, as seen in terms like 'foreign' and 'strange woman'. They are viewed as likely to engage in sexual misconduct, which threatens societal norms related to ethnicity, inheritance, and sexual behaviour. The sages advise against forcing daughters into prostitution, linking this to the behaviour of the 'strange woman'. Additionally, Fontaine (2002:42) points out that sexual activities outside of marriage are portrayed as involving primarily out-group women, whose lack of 'honour' is not problematic for in-group men. Biblical texts, especially prophetic writings, criticise foreigners for participating in 'loose' sexual practices, often with cultic implications. The adulteress, closely linked to Lady Wisdom, uses her eloquence to seduce, but her words lead to death rather than life. It emphasises the consequences of falling into her trap, which results in breaking the covenant's laws, while turning to Wisdom brings prosperity and longevity. Fontaine (2002:42) further highlights a rhetorical strategy that borrows motifs from surrounding cultures' goddess mythology, categorising elements into 'good' and 'evil' to illustrate the moral divide between wisdom and folly.

4.4 Synthesis

By examining the roles and representations of foreign women in the Old Testament's historical narratives and wisdom literature, this chapter attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of their significance. Foreign women in the

Old Testament are significant figures in Israel's history and identity, reflecting the complexities of Israel's interactions with neighbouring nations. Their narratives reflect socio-political and religious dynamics of the time, such as Ruth, the Moabite, and Rahab, who challenge and expand understanding of being part of the people of God. The portrayal of foreign women in the Old Testament is a complex and multifaceted subject that provides valuable insights into the cultural, social, and theological contexts of ancient Israel.

The Bible often portrays women as objects of male desire and valued for their reproductive roles. However, it also contains narratives challenging patriarchal norms, including biblical seductresses who use their feminine allure to influence powerful men. These women often compromise their virtue by engaging in sexually provocative actions, deceiving their targets to achieve their goals. Despite receiving praise, the morally ambiguous behaviour of these seductresses, some of whom are married, remains a point of contention. The Deuteronomistic History was written during a time of significant social and political upheaval, and the depiction of foreign women reflects the anxieties and concerns of the Israelite society. The fear of cultural and religious contamination is a recurring theme, and foreign women become scapegoats for these fears. By portraying foreign women as dangerous and seductive, the Deuteronomistic History authors justify the exclusion and subjugation of these women and, by extension, their cultures. This serves to reinforce the boundaries between Israel and the "other," maintaining the purity and superiority of the Israelite identity.

The foreign woman in Proverbs 1-9 is often associated with moral decay and peril. The book contains some of the oldest wisdom texts in the Bible, but not all references denote personified Wisdom/Folly. Feminist exegetical research views personified Wisdom as a poetic personification rather than a divine hypostasis. The introduction to Proverbs, created by the urban upper class, addresses religious and ideological questions, focusing on proper behaviour for the Israelite community. The "strange woman" in Proverbs 1-9 represents the negative counterpart to personified Wisdom, embodying concrete characteristics of real women. This contrast highlights the moral and ideological teachings guiding community behaviour and

identity. Maier (2014:77) discusses the tendency of Wisdom literature to create "cultural stereotypes" of human characters, which were introduced into social discourse by Walter Lippmann. Stereotypes are seen as a coping strategy for navigating complex worlds and helping humans navigate conflicting perceptions and anxieties. However, Maier also points out the risk of "othering" inherent in stereotyping, which negatively distinguishes individuals or groups from oneself, reducing their uniqueness and distinctiveness. The texts in Proverbs depict societal fears of foreign influence and the need to protect cultural identity. The foreign woman symbolises the allure of foreign customs and beliefs, posing a threat to the Israelite youth's moral integrity. The figure is often used as an instructional tool to convey moral teachings, illustrating the consequences of deviating from wisdom and the seductive nature of sin. This interpretation emphasises the foreign woman's educational role in reinforcing wisdom traditions and principles.

Lady Folly is a negative feminine figure in Proverbs, often depicted as an adulteress, dangerous, irresponsible, causing instability and death. She uses her eyes and tongue to flirt and entice people. In Proverbs 7, she is highly sensuous and sexualised. In Proverbs 9, both Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly are present. Lady Folly in Proverbs 9:13-18 embodies the foreign woman, symbolising the seduction of foreign religion and culture. She is also depicted as the antithesis of Lady Wisdom (Prov 9:1-12).

The sages depict the 'loose woman' and 'adulteresses' as the opposite of a 'reliable wife' and 'nurturing mother', embodying traits deemed unacceptable by male society. These women are seen as likely to engage in sexual misconduct, threatening societal norms. Sages advise against forcing daughters into prostitution, linking it to the 'strange woman' behaviour. Sexual activities outside marriage are primarily out-group women, with cultic implications. Biblical texts criticise foreigners for engaging in 'loose' sexual practices. The adulteress, closely linked to Lady Wisdom, uses eloquence but leads to death. The rhetorical strategy borrows motifs from goddess mythology to illustrate the moral divide between wisdom and folly.

This chapter discussed the roles and representations of foreign women in the Old Testament; delved into the concept of foreign women in the wisdom literature of Proverbs 1-9, and examined how these texts can enhance our understanding of Delilah's character in Judges 16. The next chapter will focus on reading the narrative of Judges 16 through a critical fabulation lens.

Chapter 5

5.1 Delilah in Judges 16: A Critical Fabulation

This chapter will unpack different perspectives of various scholars on one of the best-known biblical narratives in the Old Testament, the narrative of Samson and Delilah. One will be a brief exploration of Delilah's name, as names can carry significant cultural, historical, and personal meanings. Examining names and their associated personalities can reveal deeper insights into a character's traits, motivations, and transformations. For Delilah, her "multiple" personalities might symbolise the complexity of human identity and the different roles in which she was portrayed. Moreover, Delilah's name encapsulates a rich tapestry of identities, each reflecting a different facet of her personality. This exploration delves into how a single name can embody multiple personas, revealing the intricate layers of human identity. Exum (1996:176) examines Delilah's negative reputation and the embellishments surrounding her by first analysing the biblical account in Judges 16 and then exploring how various metatexts expand on her character. She notes that Delilah's role as the ultimate temptress in popular culture is so ingrained that it requires no further proof. She further contends that the story of Samson and Delilah is told from a male-centred perspective, portraying the woman as a symbol of the allure and peril of female sexuality, embodying a "violent force."

5.1.1 Judges 16 and Delilah's conduct

For the sake of reference and to highlight Delilah's conduct, I will give a short summary of her actions in Judges 16.

In the narrative, Delilah is a woman from the Valley of Sorek that Samson falls in love with (Judges 16:4). Immediately after her introduction, follows her encounter with the Philistine leaders, who promise her a sizeable sum of "eleven hundred pieces of silver" from each lord to find out where Samson's strength comes from (Judges 16:5). Through three separate attempts to discover Samson's secret, the Bible portrays her as a calculating strategist who uses what is frequently recognised

as a pattern of manipulation (Judges 16:6-14). Each time a similar pattern is followed: She requests the secret, Samson gives her misleading information, she tries it while he is asleep, and then she confronts him about the failure of his said vulnerability. This process is consistent throughout each effort.

Delilah's persistent inquiry, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?" (Judges 16:15) highlights the narrative's literary structure and her psychological acumen. The text states that she "pressed him daily with her words and urged him" until "his soul was vexed to death" (Judges 16:16), demonstrating the effectiveness of her emotional plea in the end. A wearing down process is implied by the Hebrew word for "pressed" that is used here, illustrating Delilah's comprehension of psychological warfare. Delilah acknowledges the sincerity of Samson's confession when he eventually shares his secret about his uncut hair as a Nazirite vow (Judges 16:17), as seen by the passage's comment that "she saw that he had told her all his heart" (Judges 16:18).

Delilah's actions culminate when she facilitates Samson's capture by having him sleep on her lap and calling for a man to shave off his seven locks of hair (Judges 16:19). The text is notably unclear about her personal feelings toward Samson, never explicitly stating whether she felt any genuine affection for him. Instead, it focuses on her role as an agent of Samson's downfall, presenting her actions with a clinical detachment that emphasises her effectiveness in accomplishing her mission for the Philistine lords. This ambiguity has made her character a subject of many discussions about her loyalties, intentions and the narrative's larger themes of gender, power and betrayal.

5.1.2. What is in a name? Delilah and her multiple personalities

Snyder (2012:138) notes that for centuries, Delilah's story has fascinated both religious and secular interpretations. She is often portrayed as a femme fatale, an alluring woman who overcame the strongest man. However, questions about her identity persist: What made her so captivating, and why did she betray her lover? Was she an Israelite or a Philistine? Was Samson her true love? Smith (1999:95) suggests that the biblical text's silence on Delilah creates ambiguity, which might

be deliberate, reflecting uncertainties about her character, relationships, and social status. This ambiguity has led to debates and avoidance by feminist biblical scholars. Snyder (2012:138) further mentions that Delilah appears in the 16th chapter of Judges, described as Samson's lover and a Philistine woman bribed to deceive him. She persuades Samson to reveal that his strength lies in his long hair, which she then exploits to betray him. Despite knowing she lived in the valley of Sorek, a border region between Hebrew and Philistine territories, her exact identity remains unclear. Consequently, her ethnic background is questioned, though she is widely assumed to be a Philistine, given Samson's attraction to Philistine women for marriage or love affairs.

According to Sasson (2020:267), the Hebrew Bible expresses the concept of love through various literary forms, including poetry, prose, and prophetic writings, thereby illustrating diverse facets of human affection, loyalty, and even desire. Significant metaphors link the idea of the "soul" with terms such as *dāvaq* and *hāšaq*, while different forms of the verb **ydd* pertain to love and sexual relations. Notably, these romantic expressions are absent in the book of Judges, which addresses themes of conflict and power dynamics. However, the term *'āhēv* appears in the context of Samson. For instance, Samson's wife from Timnah accuses him of hating her, which raises questions about her perception of his feelings. Conversely, Sasson (2020:267) notes that the narrative with Delilah suggests that Samson is genuinely in love, prompting speculation about his emotional state and his expectations for mutual affection. Unlike his brief encounter with a prostitute, Samson explicitly professes his love for Delilah before the Philistines, who intend to capture him. They persuade Delilah to deceive Samson to uncover the secret of his strength, believing that this knowledge will enable them to subdue him.

Burney (1930:406) draws a comparison between Delilah's name and the Babylonian name *Dalil-(ilu)-Ishtar*, which translates to worshipper of Ishtar. This association suggests that Delilah may be viewed as a devotee of Ishtar, thus adding a layer of cultural and religious complexity to her character. Notably, she is the only named woman in the Samson narratives, though the meaning of her name remains

enigmatic. Sasson (2020:264) observes that the scant background information provided about Delilah indicates her initial obscurity upon entering the narrative. If one disregards the postbiblical embellishments of her singular appearance, she will similarly fade into obscurity upon her departure. Despite this, Delilah stands out as the sole woman in the Samson stories to possess a name, even though one with an unclear meaning. She resides in Wadi Sorek (*nahal šōrēq*), a region known for its vineyards and serving as a permeable boundary between Hebrew and Philistine territories, likely inhabited by members of both communities.

Sasson (2020:265) discusses the ongoing debate regarding Delilah's ethnicity. While she is commonly assumed to be Philistine due to Samson's apparent attraction to Philistine women, her actual ethnicity remains uncertain. She could be Hebrew, but her profession and her enjoyment of its financial benefits might render her ethnicity irrelevant. Notably, Delilah is portrayed without any familial ties, no parents, husband, or sons, highlighting her independence from male protection, a status more common among women than often acknowledged in scholarly works. In contrast, Rabbinic literature identifies her as Samson's wife, likely to emphasise her betrayal and caution against relationships with foreign women. Snyder (2012:139) observes that the Babylonian Talmud focuses more on interpreting the text's explicit content rather than speculating on what it omits, making no assertions about Delilah's nationality or livelihood. Instead, it comments on the significance of her name, suggesting that even if Delilah was not her actual name, it aptly describes her role in weakening Samson's strength (16:19), his heart (16:18), and his actions (16:20). Additionally, the rabbis explore how Delilah persuaded Samson to disclose his secret, interpreting the phrase "she nagged him" (16:16) to mean that she distanced herself from him during intimate moments, an inference that is not explicitly stated in the biblical text.

Delilah's name is of Hebrew origin, yet she identified herself as a Philistine. Despite her Hebrew name and residence on the border between Israel and the Philistine territory, only a few scholars consider her to be an Israelite. The assumption that she is a Philistine stems from the fact that Samson's previous romantic interests were Philistine women and because she interacts with Philistine leaders.

Additionally, it is unlikely that an Israelite woman would betray Samson to his enemies (Smith 1999:94). However, Exum (1993:69) rightly cautions against the common critical assumption that Delilah is a Philistine.

Delilah is acknowledged as a fascinating figure within biblical narratives. Smith (1999:93) contends that Delilah's name is widely recognised, even among those unfamiliar with other biblical women such as Abishag, Michal, or Tamar. This widespread recognition is largely due to the nature of her story. Chambers' Dictionary defines Delilah as "the Philistine woman who deceived Samson: a courtesan; a temptress; an appealing object." Delilah is primarily known for her attempts to seduce and deceive Samson. Key traits associated with her character include attractiveness, sensuality, intelligence, self-assurance, cunning, and persistence. Furthermore, Snyder (2012:139) highlights that in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, the main issue with Delilah is her status as a foreigner. Her role as a prostitute is almost secondary, as such behaviour is seemingly expected of foreign women. In this retelling, God acts as a narrator, condemning Samson for "mingling with the daughters of the Philistines" and thereby bringing affliction upon his descendants. Pseudo-Philo suggests that while Delilah does betray Samson, her actions are part of a divine plan. Additionally, in this version, Delilah becomes Samson's wife, a twist likely intended to preserve Samson's character rather than Delilah's.

The complex interpretations of Delilah's character within the biblical narrative, as well as the subsequent historical and literary analyses, propose that Delilah's association with prostitution may arise from Samson's documented attraction to Philistine women and prostitutes, as suggested by biblical texts. This characterisation was reinforced by early Jewish commentators, such as Josephus and Pseudo-Philo, who identified her explicitly as a Philistine prostitute. Such labelling corresponds with a broader cultural inclination to regard women, especially those from enemy groups, as inherently untrustworthy. Snyder (2012:139) captures this notion succinctly, noting that Delilah's perceived dishonesty is often attributed to her gender.

The discussion then transitions to Frymer-Kensky's (2008:82) analysis, which contests the conventional demonisation of Delilah. Moreover, Delilah's narrative transcends a mere cautionary narrative about the dangers of female seduction; rather, it reflects the intricate cultural dynamics between the Israelites and the Philistines. Delilah's role in diminishing Samson's strength is interpreted as a symbolic act that renders him equal to other men, encapsulating the recurring theme of a woman serving as a civilising force amid half-civilised men, an idea evident in both American history and ancient Mesopotamian literature. Frymer-Kensky (2008:82) presents Delilah as a nuanced figure motivated by her own aspirations and needs, rather than merely positioning her as an antagonist to Samson and the Israelites.

Finally, Sasson (2020:265) contributes a more nuanced depiction of Delilah, differentiating her from the archetypal portrayal of a prostitute. Unlike other women in the Hebrew text categorised as prostitutes, Delilah is not explicitly labelled as such; instead, ancient literature frequently refers to her by the Greek term πόρνη (*pornē*). Sasson (2020:265) suggests that Delilah's associations with rulers and her capacity to amass substantial wealth suggest that she operates at a higher social and economic class, comparable to a courtesan (ἐταίρα in Greek). He draws parallels between her and prominent courtesans in Greek and Egyptian civilisations, underscoring her strategic and influential role in her engagements with powerful men. This perspective enriches Delilah's character, painting her as a sophisticated and calculating individual rather than merely a deceitful woman.

Early Christian exegetes, such as Ambrose (ca. 333-97), often followed Jewish interpreters in their analysis of Delilah's story. Ambrose, like Josephus and Pseudo-Philo, characterises Delilah as a foreigner and a prostitute, emphasising the threat posed by her foreign status. He concludes that men should avoid marrying outside their faith to prevent treachery instead of fostering spousal love. Contrary to the Talmud's view that Delilah used sex to coax Samson into revealing his secret, Ambrose argues that she gained his trust through her tears, conflating her story with that of the Timnite woman in Judges 14:16-17, who persuaded Samson with her tears (Snyder 2012:139). Smith (1999:95) notes that Delilah's depiction often

fits a stereotypical narrative pattern. She notes that Wurtzel describes the tale of Samson and Delilah as an archetypal story of cross-cultural love, like Romeo and Juliet, marked by fatal love. Feminist scholars face a dilemma: they can either ignore Delilah, rehabilitate her by emphasising her strengths, or explain her negative traits; ignoring Delilah is tempting, but raises questions about the objectives of feminist biblical scholarship. Some scholars argue that focusing on more positive texts might be more beneficial, while others worry that highlighting Delilah's negative portrayal could reinforce harmful stereotypes. The decision to be selective about biblical texts involves broader considerations about the nature of feminist biblical scholarship and feminism itself.

The story of Samson and Delilah in the Bible can be seen as a parallel to the battle of the sexes, like the gender conflicts found in Greek mythology. The notion of a superhero is distinctive in the Bible, and the idea that the deity played a more active role than merely announcing a birth is reminiscent of Zeus's interactions with mortal women. However, the Greek theme of family betrayal is not present in the biblical narrative (Frymer-Kensky 2008:83). Additionally, Frymer-Kensky (2008:83) notes that Delilah was neither Samson's daughter nor in love with a Philistine. Still, the act of cutting his hair is likely not coincidental. The many similarities between Samson and Greek heroes, and between Delilah and the women who lead to their downfall, may be attributed to the close interactions between the Israelites and Philistines in the Danite territory, particularly the valley of Sorek where Samson's adventures took place.

5.2 Delilah: The embodiment of femme fatale archetype

Frymer-Kensky's (2008:84) analysis suggests a nuanced view of Delilah, highlighting the contrasting perceptions of women's actions based on their impact on Israelite society, the story of Delilah has been interpreted to serve various purposes, yet no other biblical hero is defeated by an Israelite woman, a scenario absent from biblical narratives. Delilah, while not entirely unique, is portrayed as a "bizarro-universe" counterpart to Yael.. Frymer-Kensky (2008:84) emphasises that

neither man suspected danger, possibly due to an assumption that women were harmless. The key difference in these narratives is that Yael is celebrated as a heroine for defeating Sisera, an enemy of Israel. At the same time, Delilah is vilified for destroying one of Israel's heroes. Wurtzel (2012:41) characterises the narrative of Samson and Delilah as an archetype of fatal attraction, portraying Delilah as an early example of the *femme fatale*, a woman whose very presence is as infectious as an airborne virus to a susceptible individual like Samson. She notes that the story is one of inevitable fatal love, where death is certain, and the only questions are "who" and "when." In this case, both Samson and Delilah meet their demise. Wurtzel (2012:41) reflects on her initial encounter with Delilah's character during her youth, noting that her curiosity and imagination were her primary tools for understanding. Despite this, she intuitively felt that Delilah's approach was somehow justified, she now suggests that Delilah embodies a dangerous allure that leads to inevitable tragedy.

The challenge with interpreting the *femme fatale* merely as a stereotype of feminine malevolence or as an embodiment of male anxiety lies in the reduction of this tragic heroine to a passive figure, devoid of agency and responsibility for her actions. The *femme fatale* archetype is acknowledged as a multifaceted and evolving concept, rather than a simplistic representation of dangerous femininity (Bronfen 2004:114). Scholars contend that she should be perceived as an autonomous subject, a tragic heroine who embraces her destiny and finds liberation in the inevitability of interpersonal relationships. Delilah's role as a *femme fatale* is particularly compelling, as she uses her seductive abilities to uncover Samson's secret and betray him to his adversaries. Janey Place argues that film noir often mirrors a "male fantasy," portraying the *femme fatale* as a mythical figure who entices men and leads to their downfall. However, she highlights a significant contradiction inherent in this depiction (Bronfen 2004:114).

However, some scholars contend that Delilah's actions might not stem from a desire for power or destruction, but rather from a profound sense of independence and a rejection of societal constraints. Blyth (2017:9) discusses the enduring and widespread presence of the *femme fatale* in cultural history, highlighting her role as

a symbol of destructive allure. She argues that this archetype is deeply rooted in collective cultural memories, texts, and traditions spanning thousands of years. The femme fatale, characterised by her dangerous seductiveness, has the power to captivate and ultimately lead her victims to their downfall or death. Blyth (2017:9) emphasises the universality of this figure, citing Kate Stables' observation that the association of women with sex and death is ingrained in global consciousness. Throughout history, the femme fatale has appeared in various forms across different media, from ancient myths and sacred texts to contemporary movies, graphic novels, and video games. She has taken on the roles of deities, demigods, supernatural beings, vampires, hyper-feminised monsters, and real-life lethal women, both historical and fictional. Blyth's (2017:9) analysis underscores the femme fatale's omnipresence and adaptability, noting that she is as ancient as Eve and as relevant as modern popular culture, thereby highlighting her significant impact on the public imagination.

The character of Delilah, as represented in the biblical account of Samson and Delilah, has been analysed and interpreted in various ways throughout history. Snyder (2012:139-140) investigates these differing representations, emphasising how numerous authors and scholars have re-envisioned Delilah's character, her motivations, and her actions. He points out that Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1469-1534) presents a more sympathetic interpretation of Delilah in his commentary on Judges 16. Unlike conventional depictions that portray Delilah as a duplicitous Philistine, he (Cajetan) theorises that she may have been of Hebrew descent, arguing that the biblical text does not explicitly label her as a foreigner and thus should not lead to that presumption. Furthermore, Cajetan contends that Delilah did not intend to harm Samson; rather, she was coerced into accepting a bribe from the Philistines under the impression that Samson would merely be incapacitated, not killed. This perspective renders Delilah a more complex character, potentially acting out of coercion rather than malevolence.

In contrast, Snyder (2012:140) notes Salten (1931), who depicts Delilah as a youthful and innocent girl, albeit still a Philistine. Delilah comes to embrace faith in Samson's God and resists betraying him, even when facing pressure from her

family. In this version, it is her younger sister who overhears the secret of Samson's strength and subsequently betrays him by cutting his hair. Salten's portrayal highlights Delilah's loyalty to Samson, as she vows to die alongside him upon his capture, framing her as a tragic figure ensnared by dire circumstances. Conversely, this portrayal of Delilah by Saint-Saëns (1877) offers a drastically different interpretation, characterising Delilah as a Philistine priestess of Dagon who harbours deep animosity toward Samson. From the outset, she conspires against him, driven by a desire for vengeance rather than financial gain. Despite warnings to avoid her, Samson is lured by her beauty and seductive words.

In this rendition, Snyder (2012:140) notes that Saint-Saëns' Delilah is revealed as a treacherous antagonist, ridiculing Samson in the temple following his capture. Exum (1996:175-176) examines the depiction of female curiosity and betrayal within Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, utilising Greek, and biblical mythology. The act of name-calling, especially the use of 'Delilah,' evokes an image of female curiosity intertwined with betrayal. Terms like 'prying' and 'lying' suggest malicious intent, reinforcing the stereotype of deceitful women. Additionally, the name 'Delilah' carries strong connotations of treachery and deceit, epitomising the femme fatale, a woman who is both sexually alluring and lethal to men. Exum (1996:176) highlights that this cultural symbol is comparable to other biblical figures such as Jezebel and Judas, whose names have similarly become synonymous with betrayal and moral corruption. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of 'Delilah' as a 'temptress or treacherous love' emphasises her role as a cultural trope. Exum's analysis underscores how these names, beyond their literary origins, have infiltrated the common language, embodying deep-seated cultural fears about female agency and morality. The connection between Delilah and Judas in modern fiction, as illustrated as a character in Pat Conroy's *Beach Music*, further demonstrates the enduring influence of these archetypes in shaping societal views on betrayal and treachery.

5.2.1 Exploring the multifaceted character of Delilah: Interpretations in music, literature, and film.

Exum (1996:178) explores the complex interplay between music and narrative in Saint-Saëns' opera, drawing a parallel to Calderon's identification of central figures in his painting. She (Exum) suggests that much like Calderon, Saint-Saëns guides his audience on how to interpret the music by situating it within its intended narrative context. The duet between Delilah and Samson, performed just before Samson succumbs to Delilah's seduction and subsequent betrayal, is intended to be heard with this dramatic irony in mind. However, Exum (1996:178) challenges this prescribed listening approach by questioning whether the music's inherent eroticism and emotional intensity can be fully constrained by the libretto's narrative. Moreover, the music's beauty and passion might transcend the treachery of Delilah's character, suggesting a dissonance between the sincerity conveyed by the musical score and the deceitful actions of the character. This raises the intriguing possibility that the music instils Delilah with a depth and complexity that the libretto alone does not acknowledge, thereby inviting listeners to consider the music's power to evoke genuine emotion and sincerity, even in the portrayal of a duplicitous character.

Moreover, Snyder (2012:140) in Milton's "Samson Agonistes" (1691), argues that Delilah is further depicted as a complex figure, attempting to justify her actions to the blinded Samson through a series of justifications relating to female weakness, her desire to retain him, and her loyalty to her god and country. While she denies betraying him for financial motives, insisting that she was assured he would not be harmed, her ultimate betrayal casts her in a treacherous light. The portrayal underscores the internal turmoil and diverse motivations informing Delilah's actions, rendering her neither entirely innocent nor completely villainous.

Adding another dimension, Snyder (2012:140) notes that Cecil B. DeMille's film suggests that Delilah is the younger sister of Samson's first wife, the Philistine woman from Timnah. Overcome by jealousy and a desire for Samson's love, her bitterness leads to betrayal when she is spurned. However, upon discovering Samson's blindness, her jealousy transforms into remorse, and she returns to his

side in his time of need, choosing to perish with him in the temple. DeMille's portrayal shines a light on Delilah's underlying loyalty and enduring affection for Samson, despite her previous actions. Exum (1996:178) explores the interpretive flexibility inherent in Saint-Saëns' musical score by drawing comparisons to the discussions surrounding Calderon's depiction of the book of Ruth. She suggests that much like the varied interpretations that emerge from viewers of Calderon's painting, listeners might contemplate alternative placements for the love duet within the narrative of Samson and Delilah. In this context, Exum (1996:178) cites Cecil B. De Mille's film adaptation of Samson and Delilah as a pertinent metatextual example, illustrating how the duet could be recontextualised to occur after Delilah's act of betrayal. In De Mille's film, Delilah, overwhelmed by guilt and seeking redemption, confronts Samson in the repository, leading to a profound interaction wherein she conveys her remorse and desire to apologise for her actions. This moment, characterised by intense emotional exchanges and Samson's internal conflict between vengeance and love, is suggested as an appropriate setting for Saint-Saëns' music to amplify the emotional intensity of their feelings. Exum's (1996:178) analysis underscores the potential of the music to surpass its original narrative limitations, indicating that the emotional resonance of the score can enrich and even redefine the dynamics of the characters' relationships and motivations, enhancing the audience's engagement and comprehension of the story.

The varied interpretations of Delilah's character, as explored by Snyder (2012:141), illustrate the rich and intricate nature of her depiction in literature and commentary. From Cajetan's sympathetic Hebrew interpretation to Saint-Saëns' vengeful priestess, and from Salten's innocent girl to Milton's conflicted betrayer, Delilah's character emerges as multifaceted and subject to a range of interpretations. These portrayals reflect the creative efforts of authors and filmmakers to elaborate on the biblical narrative, breathing new life into Delilah's story. Through these interpretations, Delilah is presented as a character of significant depth and complexity, whose motivations and actions continue to engage and inspire scholarly discourse. However, Exum (1996:179) challenges the assumption that the narrative of Samson and Delilah must strictly follow its biblical origins, highlighting the

adaptability and enduring nature of its themes. She notes that the biblical account is just one version of a broader narrative pattern where a woman learns and betrays a strong man's secret. This pattern has been retold and reinterpreted across different cultures and time periods, showcasing its universal resonance. The version featuring Samson and Delilah became prominent in Western culture largely due to its inclusion in the Bible, which has led to its widespread recognition and influence. However, as a cultural artefact, this story has undergone numerous embellishments and adaptations that extend beyond its original biblical context. Exum (1996:179) argues that these reinterpretations cannot be fully constrained by the ancient text, emphasising the dynamic nature of storytelling. Before exploring specific adaptations, she (Exum) suggests a closer examination of the biblical narrative to identify the elements that make it particularly amenable to reinterpretation and expansion, thereby acknowledging the fluidity and multiplicity of its potential developments.

Snyder and Smith both provide complex views on Delilah's character, contesting both traditional and feminist readings. Snyder (2012:141) points out that Delilah is often seen either as a deceitful woman or as one who redeems herself through loyalty to Samson, questioning whether these interpretations are exhaustive. He proposes that Delilah may be seen as redeemable without needing to regret her choices, particularly from the Philistine viewpoint. On the other hand, Smith (1999:108) examines the feminist effort to rediscover women in the Bible, noting the mixed feelings feminists have towards Delilah, who represents both empowerment and vulnerability. She employs traditionally feminine strategies, such as using tears, nagging, and sexual allure, to achieve her goals. She argues that Delilah's actions, which led to her financial independence, might be appreciated by feminists; however, her use of sexual power in stereotypical manners causes discomfort within feminist frameworks. She further situates Delilah within the archetype of seducer found in myths and folktales, which is critiqued by both patriarchal and feminist views. Smith (1999:109) suggests that post-feminists may find Delilah's behaviour more acceptable since it defies both traditional and feminist

critiques. Together, Snyder and Smith provide a rich and nuanced examination of Delilah, urging readers to rethink her character beyond standard interpretations.

Furthermore, Smith (1999:109) examines how feminists might approach a reinterpretation of Delilah's story, proposing that the biblical interpretation may not be as inherently negative and patriarchal as traditionally believed. She notes that certain feminist scholars contend that a nuanced examination of Judges 16 reveals the narrative's dual focus, emphasising not only the strength of the male character, Samson, but also the strength and agency of Delilah. She notes that this interpretation challenges proven notions and underscores Delilah's pivotal role within the narrative. Moreover, she suggests that according to Sölle and Kirchberger (1994:141), the Philistines might have created the original Samson legend, in which case Delilah would be seen as a patriotic heroine.

Snyder (2012:141) made a similar point, suggesting that Milton's poetic characterisation of Delilah suggests that the Philistines would have praised her behaviour, in much the same way that the Hebrews lauded Yael for delivering Sisera into their hands. He suggests that we may even find parallels with Rahab who betrayed her people into Israelite hands for personal growth.

Concurring with the similar views of Sölle and Kirchberger (1994) and Snyder (2012) Klein (1993:65) points out that Delilah displays committed loyalty to her cultural heritage. Although the reader might not fully comprehend the evolving circumstances unfavourable to the Israelites, it is unjust to reproach Delilah for prioritising her community. The financial transaction involved suggests a form of 'prostitution,' a practice deeply scorned by the Israelites. Moreover, Klein (1993:66) contends that Delilah's residential location, positioned above the coastal Philistine cities, carries symbolic significance linked to 'high places' associated with cultic practices, including sexual rites. She (Klein) further speculates that 'prostitution' as a cultural practice was likely prevalent among the Philistines, indicating that Delilah's actions should not be evaluated through an Israelite lens. However, Delilah being portrayed as a figure who, despite her efforts to protect her people, is often scorned by readers sympathetic to the Israelites. The demand from the Philistine

lords for Delilah to betray her lover is presented as a politically motivated act, underscoring the frequently unethical nature of political strategies.

5.2.2 Reinterpreting Delilah: A feminist perspective on independence and complexity in biblical narratives

Klein (1993:66) characterises Delilah as a multifaceted and resourceful woman who, viewed as a potential heroine by her own culture, uses manipulation through love to orchestrate her lover's demise. The narrative's expectation that women take advantage of men's vulnerabilities, along with the condemnation of women who defy male expectations, adds complexity to Delilah's representation. Klein's analysis illuminates the complex relationships among cultural norms, political ethics, and gender dynamics within the story. However, Snyder (2012:141) observes that the examination of Delilah arises from the recognition that the biblical narrative contains many unresolved questions. These gaps should not be viewed as deficiencies but as opportunities for further exploration. Moreover, the variety of interpretations that have emerged in response to these questions should not constrain but rather expand the interpretative possibilities of this well-known narrative. He also recommends that in developing our own portrayals of Delilah, we should heed the advice of scholar Smith by revisiting the text, paying close attention to both the explicit content and the implicit gaps. Furthermore, Snyder (2012:141) advises that the various perspectives on Delilah are numerous and each one merits an opportunity to be heard, employing a feminist interpretive framework when examining biblical women, advocating for the consideration of their narratives from the standpoint of a woman participant or observer. Viewed through the lens of a Philistine woman, Delilah can be perceived as a patriotic individual who exhibits initiative. Although the biblical author may depict Delilah as a destabilising force within society, an alternative perspective reveals her as a commendable model of female independence, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency, the approach highlights the importance of diverse viewpoints in deepening our comprehension of biblical texts (Smith 1999:109). Additionally, Smith (1999:110) offers an analysis of Delilah's character, supported by the perspectives of various scholars, including

Danna Nolan Fewell. According to Fewell (1992, as cited in Smith, 1999:110), traditional interpretations have often unjustly disparaged Delilah, as her portrayal is frequently overshadowed by the heroic image of Samson. She (Fewell) argues that Delilah is seldom analysed as an independent character; she is cast in the role of the villain who contributes to Samson's demise. Nonetheless, she argues that Delilah transcends the typical antagonist role, serving as a critical figure within the narrative whose actions and motivations propel the storyline forward. In contrast to other female characters in Samson's story, Delilah is distinctly named and actively engages in the plot, thereby becoming the centre of the reader's attention. Furthermore, Delilah's identity is self-determined, unanchored to any male authority. Her introduction is solely by name, and she navigates her relationships and business affairs autonomously, without the intervention of a father, brother, or husband. This independence underscores Delilah's ability to attain financial independence, establishing her as a self-sufficient and influential character in her own right.

Klein (1993:62) provides an analysis of Delilah's character, complementing the perspectives of Smith and Fewell. Klein observes that Delilah's Philistine heritage makes her genealogy irrelevant in an Israelite context, underscoring her lack of roots in both time and place. This rootlessness contrasts with the Israelite focus on lineage and generational continuity, setting Delilah apart. Klein (1993:62) depicts Delilah as a notably independent woman who directly engages in profitable transactions with men, using her sexuality to her advantage. Her actions create a complex dynamic, as she is both loved by one man and compensated by others, which adds layers to her character. This complexity makes Delilah more intriguing than the straightforward prostitute of Gaza in Judges 16. Her betrayal of Samson for financial gain marks her as the most morally compromised of his lovers. Unlike Samson's wife, who betrays him out of fear, or the prostitute of Gaza, who remains neutral, Delilah's self-serving actions cast her in a particularly negative light for the Israelite audience. Klein's interpretation highlights Delilah as the culminating female figure in the Book of Judges' portrayal of flawed characters.

5.3 The dangerous seductress: Foreign women in biblical narratives and Proverbs

Tan (2008:65) suggests that the portrayal of foreign women in the Old Testament, particularly highlighting their depiction as seductresses, presents them as a danger to the Israelite protagonist. These seductive encounters frequently occur through verbal manipulation, as exemplified by the figures of Potiphar's wife and Delilah. This insight paves the way for a nuanced analysis of the motif of the foreign woman in Proverbs. Furthermore, Exum (2016:47) highlights that the texts from Judges 14-16 substantiate this theme by highlighting three female figures who, rather than being mothers, are instead characterised as sexually available and alluring to Samson. Such portrayals highlight the inherent dangers associated with viewing women as mere objects of sexual desire. The biblical texts endeavour to mitigate this perceived threat by consolidating these women into a singular, adverse depiction of the 'foreign woman,' thereby reinforcing a persistent stereotype within biblical literature. Consequently, comparing the narratives in Judges with the warnings in Proverbs, a consistent theme emerges: the foreign woman as a symbol of danger and seduction. This characterisation aligns with the negative image described by Exum, reflecting that this motif reflects broader cultural concerns about female sexuality and its perceived threat to male integrity and societal stability. Exceptions like Ruth, a foreign woman depicted positively, underscore the general suspicion and negativity towards foreign women in biblical texts. Ruth's story is an exception that highlights the prevailing negative attitudes. Looking back at Fox's (1997:614) outline of the lectures, as noted in the previous chapter of this study, Fox (1997:620) argues that his lectures primarily caution against the dangers of seduction. The type of wisdom that can resist this threat isn't the ability to uncover new truths but rather deep knowledge, profound insight, or exceptional intellect. Therefore, the foreign woman motif in Proverbs 1-9 can be understood as part of a broader narrative strategy aimed at warning against the dangers of deviating from established moral and social norms. This motif can be said to serve to reinforce cultural anxieties about female sexuality and its potential to disrupt societal order.

Exum (1996:187) discusses the perceived dangers that foreign women pose to Israel's ethnic and religious identity, as well as to the well-being of Israelite men. She highlights Deuteronomic laws that forbid intermarriage with foreigners, emphasising the fear that such marriages would lead Israelite men away from their faith and towards the worship of other gods, which would provoke divine anger. This prohibition reflects a broader concern for maintaining religious purity and ethnic boundaries within the Israelite community. Additionally, Exum (1996:187) points out that the book of Proverbs portrays foreign women as seductive and dangerous, capable of leading young men to moral and spiritual ruin. The repeated warnings in Proverbs about the "strange woman" underscore the life-threatening danger she represents, reinforcing the idea of foreign women as a significant threat. Overall, Exum's analysis reveals a deep fear of cultural and religious contamination through intermarriage and a strong desire to preserve Israelite identity and faith.

Exum (1996:188) argues that the narrator of the Samson story relies on existing biases against Philistines and foreign women, rather than creating these negative images anew. These intertwined stereotypes make them more powerful, leading to the assumption that Delilah, being a Philistine, is inherently problematic. As a foreign woman who seduces the unsuspecting Israelite Samson, Delilah is easily linked to the dangerous and seductive foreign woman described in Proverbs. Exum (1996:188) also points out that the narrative structure reinforces this view; the story of Delilah (16:4-22) follows right after Samson's encounter with a harlot (16:1-3), connected only by the phrase "and it happened after that." This sequence shapes the reader's interpretation, making it seem like Samson's relationship with Delilah is another illegitimate affair, even though the text does not explicitly state that they had sexual relations, unlike the account with the harlot. The text simply mentions that Samson loved Delilah, but the context and prevailing stereotypes influence the audience's perception of their relationship.

Building on Exum's argument, my perspective is that Delilah is portrayed in a manner like the foreign woman described in Proverbs 1-9. Both characters are depicted as seductive yet dangerous, posing significant threats to Israelite men. As a Philistine, Delilah is inherently viewed as problematic and is easily associated with

the strange woman in Proverbs, who is repeatedly warned against due to her ability to lead men into moral and spiritual degradation. The narrative surrounding Delilah amplifies existing biases and stereotypes, making her a fitting representation of the archetypal dangerous foreign woman. Similarly, the foreign woman in Proverbs is characterised by her alluring nature and the dangers she presents, steering young men away from the path of righteousness. Both portrayals emphasise the perceived threat that foreign women pose to the well-being and faithfulness of Israelite men, thereby reinforcing the idea that such women must be avoided to maintain religious and moral integrity.

Blyth (2017:60) suggests that these textual clues imply Delilah's involvement in prostitution, the historical identification of Delilah as a prostitute has been perpetuated by biblical interpreters since the early centuries of the Common Era. Notably, Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, refers to Delilah as a Philistine harlot, while Pseudo-Philo conflates her with the Gaza prostitute mentioned in Judges 16:1. This identification is not explicitly supported by the biblical narrative but is inferred from her unconventional gender roles and the absence of identified male kin. The comparison to Rahab, another biblical prostitute who lived independently, further reinforces this interpretation.

Fisher (2019:115-116) presents a counterargument that challenges the traditional interpretation of Delilah as a prostitute. He argues that the concept of "strange women" in Proverbs does not necessarily imply prostitution. Instead, these women are depicted as morally loose and dangerous, not because they exchange love for money, but because they embody the threat of temptation and destruction. Fisher's (2019:116) analysis highlights the distinction between the appearance and actions of a prostitute and the actual exchange of services for money. This perspective shifts the focus from prostitution to the broader theme of the moral and sexual danger posed by such women. Moreover, Fisher delves into the cultural and social implications of labelling women as "strange" or "foreign." The terminology used to describe these women often serves to discredit them by emphasising their otherness. This otherness is not limited to foreigners but extends to any woman who deviates from societal norms. The figure of the "strange woman" in Proverbs

epitomises the outsider, drawing on existing hostilities towards foreign women. This characterisation plays on the fear of the unknown and the perceived threat posed by those who do not conform to established norms. The wisdom literature uses this figure to warn against the dangers of succumbing to temptation and the destructive power of such women.

Therefore, bringing forth these two perspectives of Blyth and Fisher, they present a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and textual interpretations of Delilah's character. The identification of Delilah as a prostitute is rooted in historical readings and cultural biases. At the same time, alternative interpretations challenge this view by focusing on the broader themes of moral and sexual danger. The use of terminology to emphasise otherness and the implicit hostility towards foreign women further complicate the portrayal of Delilah and similar characters in biblical literature. These interpretations reflect the ongoing struggle to understand and define the roles of women in ancient texts and their implications for contemporary readings.

Fisher (2019:116) examines the figure of the "strange woman" in biblical literature, particularly within the context of Israel's religious and cultural identity. One of the central ideas is the threat posed by the strange woman to the religious and cultural identity of Israel. The wisdom teacher emphasises the importance of establishing a normative morality, where faithfulness to one's spouse is crucial for a functioning society. The strange woman, however, represents a dysfunctional society characterised by cultural and cultic foreignness. This foreignness is not merely an external attribute but is deeply intertwined with the woman's identity and actions, making her a symbol of societal instability and moral decay. Furthermore, the strange woman serves as a negative group identity marker, highlighting the ultimate threat to the social structure, which relies on the stability of the family. Her presence and actions are seen as undermining the foundational values of the community, posing a significant danger to the cohesion and continuity of the society. The wisdom literature uses her character to illustrate the consequences of deviating from established norms and the potential for societal collapse when these norms are not upheld.

Moreover, Fisher (2019:116) delves into the eroticism associated with the strange woman, which is portrayed in a highly negative light. Her erotic allure is not merely a personal attribute but is loaded with broader implications of apostasy and death. Involvement with her is depicted as leading to spiritual and moral downfall, emphasising the severe consequences of straying from the path of righteousness. This portrayal reinforces the idea that the strange woman embodies the ultimate temptation and destruction, serving as a cautionary figure for the community. However, Samson could be an example of a “man” who gets involved with this kind of woman. Niditch (2008:153) argues that the narratives of Samson are characterised by recurring motifs, language, and patterns that highlight his interactions with foreign women, his superhuman feats, and his association with symbols of fertility. Samson’s narrative is marked by his overtures to women such as the Timnite, the harlot, and Delilah, and his extraordinary acts like killing a lion with his bare hands and destroying the house of Dagon. Moreover, Niditch (2008:154) indicates that these tales also emphasise themes of trickery, vengeance, and counter-vengeance, portraying Samson as a complex hero whose life is a series of dramatic developments. The narrative threads include the wavering romance, the conflict between Israelites and Philistines, and the contrast between social norms and antisocial behaviour. Women in Samson’s stories are depicted as commodities of exchange, often leading to deception and destabilisation rather than stability. The overarching message is a caution against forming social connections with enemies, with Samson serving as a charismatic holy man fulfilling divine purposes. Therefore, Samson’s actions represent a deviation from righteousness. His repeated engagements with foreign women and his susceptibility to their deception illustrate a departure from the teachings of wisdom and obedience to Yahweh. Samson’s interactions with these women, particularly Delilah, lead to his downfall, highlighting the dangers of straying from divine commandments. His feats of strength and acts of vengeance, while heroic, also underscore his hubris and failure to adhere to a righteous path. This deviation is further emphasised by his ultimate betrayal by Delilah, which serves as a critical turning point in his narrative, illustrating the consequences of his moral and spiritual lapses.

Blyth (2017:62) points out that Delilah is often assumed to be in a sexual relationship with Samson despite the lack of explicit textual evidence. This assumption is rooted in contemporary constructions of gender and sexuality, where Delilah is cast as the hypersexual seductress who manipulates Samson's desires to bring about his downfall. This portrayal aligns with the broader theme of the strange woman, who is depicted as a morally loose and dangerous figure, embodying the ultimate threat to societal and religious stability. Delilah is like the depiction of Lady Folly in Proverbs who uses verbal temptation to deviate from the teachings of wisdom. Miles (2004:66) indicates that folly in Proverbs is depicted as closely tied to verbal temptation, which leads one away from the teachings of wisdom. The bridal imagery metaphorically urges the 'son' to embrace Wisdom as both a bride and a lover, underscoring the intimate and desirable nature of wisdom. The poetry contrasts economic and erotic codes, showing how the allure of the Other Woman, or folly, prompts parental guidance. This Other Woman is portrayed as the main adversary in the father's teachings, deceiving the naive 'son' with her seductive and misleading speech. Her 'smooth tongue' and 'smooth words' are set against the father's cautionary advice, highlighting the seductive power of her language. Her beauty and seductive charms further ensnare her victims, presenting a dangerous mix of allure and deception. The most treacherous aspect of this femme fatale is her ability to imitate the language of Wisdom, making it essential for the 'son' to discern between true wisdom and the seductive, yet destructive, allure of folly. Through this depiction, Miles underscores the vital importance of adhering to the teachings of wisdom and the fear of Yahweh, rather than being misled by the enticing but fatal temptations of folly.

Moreover, Delilah's role as a temptress and seductress is further reinforced by the interpretations of biblical scholars. She is often described as taking the active lead in her relationship with Samson, using her feminine allure to entice and betray him. This characterisation is consistent with the depiction of the strange woman in Proverbs, whose eroticism is loaded with negativity and whose involvement implies moral and spiritual danger. Delilah's actions are seen as undermining the stability

of the family and the social structure, posing a significant threat to the community's cohesion and values (Blyth 2017:62-63). Both Blyth and Fisher highlight the concept of otherness and implicit hostility towards foreign women. In the case of Delilah, who many scholars suggest is as a Philistine, is viewed as an outsider and a threat to the Israelite hero, Samson. This otherness (as argued by Blyth and Fisher) is emphasised by her actions and the cultural differences between her and the Israelites. The wisdom literature's portrayal of the strange woman as a symbol of societal dysfunction and moral decay reflects the broader anxieties about foreignness and the need to uphold established norms. Delilah's character serves to illustrate the dangers associated with those who do not conform to the community's values and the potential for societal collapse when these norms are not maintained.

Furthermore, Blyth (2017:63) discusses the broader implications of Delilah's actions and her impact on Samson's masculinity and mission. She refers to Nancy Tischler who describes Delilah as a "cynical manipulator of sensuality" who poses a real threat to Samson's masculinity and his divine mission. This interpretation underscores the idea that Delilah's betrayal is not just a personal act of treachery but a symbolic threat to the collective identity and values of Israel. Roger Ryan's portrayal of Delilah as a temptress who uses feminine allure to betray "poor" Samson further reinforces the notion of her as a dangerous and manipulative figure.

Contrary to what most scholars suggest about Delilah's ethnicity, Frymer-Kensky (2008:88) argues that Delilah and Athaliah are Israelite women, their foreignness is not rooted in their ethnicity but in their actions, which oppose Israelite institutions. She suggests that villainy is a matter of behaviour rather than traits. Over time, however, this distinction blurs, and later interpretations equate foreignness with villainy. This shift reflects a broader tendency in post-biblical traditions and contemporary scholarship to assume that villains are foreigners, highlighting a transformation in the perception of otherness from a behavioural to an essential characteristic. Moreover, Exum (1996:221) complements Frymer-Kensky's argument by contending that the portrayal of women as seductive or threatening reveals more about the men who created these stories than about the women

themselves by suggesting that the biblical narratives are from a male-centred perspective. Exum challenges the archetype of the femme fatale by suggesting that it obscures underlying aspects of masculinity. By focusing on how men are constructed in these narratives, she introduces the concept of the “Samson complex,” which encapsulates a man’s conflicting desires to submit to and fear being harmed by a woman. This complex is central to the story of Samson and Delilah, where Samson’s vulnerability is driven by deeper psychological needs beyond mere sexual desire.

Frymer-Kensky and Exum’s analyses reveal that the depiction of women as foreign or villainous in biblical narratives is not an inherent truth but rather a reflection of male anxieties and perceptions. This perspective aligns with the portrayal of Lady Folly in Proverbs, who embodies the dangers of seductive and immoral behaviour. Just as Lady Folly’s allure leads men astray, biblical narratives depict women like Delilah as threats to Israelite institutions due to their actions, not their origins. This portrayal serves as a caution against behaviours that deviate from the path of wisdom and righteousness.

Moreover, Leonard-Fleckman (2022:416) points out that the narratives of Samson highlight his relationships with women, which result in social discord and destabilisation. It is Samson’s arrogance and impulsiveness that are the recurring problems, rather than the women themselves. The narrative underscores Samson’s foolishness more than it does seduction or deceit. Moreover, Exum (2016:4-5) presents the story of Samson as a warning that echoes the patriarchal advice in Proverbs, stressing the dangers women pose and the necessity of resisting their allure. Samson’s actions, which go against the counsel in Proverbs, highlight his repeated mistakes with foreign women, first with his Philistine bride and then with Delilah. By revealing his secrets to these women, Samson defies his parents and the patriarchal norm that women should be submissive to men. Instead, his love and vulnerability empower these women, leading to his downfall. Exum’s interpretation suggests that Samson’s story warns of the emasculating effects of succumbing to female temptation, reinforcing the idea that men must maintain control to preserve their manhood and lives.

5.3.1 Delilah as the metaphor for Folly

In the biblical narrative of Judges 16, Delilah is often interpreted embodying the characteristics of the foreign woman (Lady Folly) from Proverbs 1-9. Both figures use charm and deceit to lead men astray, resulting in their downfall. Delilah, through her manipulation of Samson, uncovers the secret of his strength, leading to his capture and suffering, many of which emphasise her role as a femme fatale, an alluring woman who uses her beauty and sensuality to acquire what she wants. Just like Tan in the preceding chapter has described that the words of a foreign woman in Proverbs 5:3 are “smooth as oil” they are also bitter and their sharp like wormwood and two-edged sword; additionally, her (Lady Folly’s) seductive nature extends beyond her physical allure to her words, which are deceptive and manipulative. This characterisation aligns her with the “foreign woman” motif found in Proverbs, where she symbolises the dangers of foreign influence and adultery. Her beauty, though not explicitly detailed, is noted as captivating, playing on the imagination of her victims, who are warned not to “desire her beauty” nor be “captured by her eyelashes.” Lady Folly’s seductive nature extends beyond her physical allure to her words, which are deceptive and manipulative.

However, drawing from Tan’s descriptive nature of Lady Folly’s words likened to a wormwood and two-edged sword, the same could be argued with Delilah’s character. The biblical text’s silence on these aspects opens the door to multiple interpretations, with Delilah’s character being far from one-dimensional. Blyth (2017:34) examines the role of disguise as a key trait of nineteenth-century hard-boiled and noir femme fatales, she notes from Montrelay’s *“Inquiry into Femininity”* which suggests that these women utilise their physical appearance to craft a deceptive exterior, effectively masking their true selves. This act of masquerade allows them to manipulate how they are perceived, blending appearance with reality. By using their bodies to project a false identity, these characters engage in a sophisticated performance of deception.

Blyth's (2017:34) analysis reveals the femme fatale's adeptness at illusion and subterfuge, highlighting broader themes of authenticity and deceit within the genre. This exploration underscores the complex dynamics of identity and disguise, positioning the femme fatale as a masterful manipulator of perception. Moreover, the argument of several scholars including the perspectives of Smith and Snyder in the preceding chapter; highlights the deliberate ambiguity surrounding Delilah's identity, particularly her ethnicity and relationship with Samson. Many scholarly interpretations on Delilah's characterisation have positioned her as an enigmatic figure whose motivations remain elusive.

While traditionally considered a Philistine, some scholars suggest that Delilah's actions are motivated not by national loyalty but by financial gain, complicating her characterisation as merely a foreign seductress. Blyth (2017:79-80) explores the depiction of femme fatales in 20th-century cultural texts, highlighting their portrayal as morally ambiguous figures who exploit others for personal gain, whether for social power, egotistical satisfaction, or material wealth. This portrayal is mirrored in some interpretations of the biblical character Delilah from Judges 16, where scholars suggest her betrayal of Samson was driven purely by greed. The narrative emphasises Delilah's financial reward from the Philistines as her primary motive, with no other motivations explicitly mentioned. Exum (2016:64) argues that the narrator of Judges 16 intentionally omits alternative explanations for Delilah's actions, guiding readers to conclude that her complicity was secured through monetary incentives. Blyth's analysis underscores the theme of femme fatales as manipulative and self-serving, drawing parallels between literary and biblical representations of women who use their allure and cunning to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, this ambiguity combined with Delilah's strategic manipulation of Samson, challenges simple dichotomies of loyalty and betrayal, suggesting instead a woman who navigates complex social and political dynamics. Feminist scholars such as Klein and Frymer-Kensky argue that Delilah's actions may reflect a deeper loyalty to her people or a desire for personal survival in a patriarchal world that often vilifies autonomous women. In this reading, Delilah is not merely a villain but a multifaceted character whose independence and economic motivations challenge

patriarchal structures. They have further nuanced Delilah's portrayal, focusing on her role within the cultural and political tensions between the Israelites and Philistines. However, in Proverbs 1-9, Lady Folly's role as a cautionary figure underscores the societal need to maintain cultural and religious purity amidst external influences. She is frequently used as an instructional trick to warn young men about the consequences of straying from the path of wisdom, which is represented by Lady Wisdom. This contrast serves to reinforce the teachings of wisdom traditions, positioning Lady Folly as a negative counterpart to Lady Wisdom. Lady Folly is thus more than a literal figure of temptation; she represents the broader dangers of folly, sin, and the abandonment of wisdom, serving as a warning to resist seductive but destructive paths.

5.3.2 Samson's weakness: The fallen hero; the man who could not resist folly and could not keep to divine regulations.

Samson can be linked to the "man" (or son) who is warned about the foreign woman (Lady Folly) in Proverbs 1-9. Despite his strength and divine calling, he repeatedly falls for the allure of women who lead him away from his commitments and ultimately to his downfall. Samson's story exemplifies the consequences of succumbing to such temptations, reinforcing the importance of adhering to the wisdom and understanding offered by Lady Wisdom. Correspondingly, Brensinger (1999:150) examines the narrative of Samson, which highlights the intricate relationship between divine empowerment and human folly. The account of Samson's interactions with the Philistine woman from Timnah emphasises the influence of the Spirit of the Lord, which enables Samson's remarkable feats, such as killing a lion, thirty Philistines, and a thousand Philistines (Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14). However, these moments of divine strength are closely followed by negative outcomes, including broken vows and an unrelenting quest for revenge. This juxtaposition underscores a central theme in Samson's story: the conflict between his God-given abilities and his vulnerability to folly. Moreover, Brensinger (1999:150) depicts Samson as a character who, despite his divine endowments, cannot escape the pitfalls of human weakness, leading to a series of events

characterised by both heroic deeds and personal failures, presenting a disquieting blend of divine intervention and human frailty, illustrating the complexities of Samson's character and his tragic fate.

Brensinger (1999:151) points out several critical aspects of Samson's conduct prior to his encounter with Delilah. Samson's choice to marry a Philistine woman without seeking his parents' advice demonstrates a clear disregard for both legal and parental guidance, reflecting a broader Israelite inclination to act on personal desires. This decision highlights Samson's impulsiveness and vulnerability to folly, driven by his attraction to physical beauty rather than wisdom or counsel. Also, the narrative implies that, despite these actions, the Lord orchestrated events to create a pretext for action against the Philistines, underscoring divine sovereignty. As a result, Brensinger's revelation resonates with Proverbs 1-9, where the exhortations to the son about wisdom warn of the consequences for those who refuse to listen (vv. 1:20-33). Proverbs consistently contrasts the paths of wisdom and folly, advocating for adherence to wise counsel and the fear of the Lord. Samson's behaviour exemplifies the repercussions of ignoring such wisdom, as his impulsive choices lead to both personal and communal turmoil. Thus, Samson's story serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of forsaking wisdom for immediate gratification, akin to the warnings in Proverbs against following the seductive but destructive path of folly.

Moreover, Miles (2004:75-76) portrays a scene where the poet observes a group of young men, focusing on one individual who epitomises naivety and susceptibility to enticement. This young man's lack of common sense, highlighted by his presence in a morally dubious area, mirrors the characteristics previously attributed to the adulterer in Proverbs 6:32. The poet's scrutiny of this young man serves as a reflective device, drawing a parallel between the youth's foolishness and Solomon's own past indiscretions. This association underscores a broader theme of self-recognition and introspection, where the young man's actions act as a mirror, reflecting Solomon's own naivety and lack of wisdom. Through this vignette, Miles (2004:76) suggests that the young man's folly is not an isolated incident but a reflection of a more pervasive human condition, one that even a wise figure like

Solomon can recognise in himself. This narrative technique emphasises the timeless and universal nature of folly and the importance of self-awareness in the pursuit of wisdom. However, the parallels between the young man that is observed by the poet according to Miles and Samson are striking, particularly in their shared themes of naivety, susceptibility to temptation and the consequences of folly. Both the young man and Samson exhibit a lack of common sense and naivety, with the young man's presence in a morally doubtful area mirroring Samson's impulsive decision to marry a Philistine woman without seeking his parents' counsel. This behaviour highlights a disregard for wisdom and a vulnerability to making poor choices based on immediate desires.

In the Samson episode, the Israelites show no indication of even wanting to be delivered. Manoah and his wife are happy simply to avoid contact with the Philistines (14:3). And Samson does not want to fight the Philistines; he wants to copulate with their women. (Younger 2002:361)

The young man's susceptibility to the allure of the "red-light district" parallels Samson's attraction to the Philistine woman and Delilah based on their beauty, with both characters drawn to what is immediately appealing without considering the long-term consequences. Also, Miles (2004:76) notes that the young man's actions serve as a mirror reflecting Solomon's own past indiscretions and lack of wisdom, like how Samson's story reflects the broader human condition, where even those chosen by God can fall prey to folly. Solomon who was associated with wisdom, could also not resist to get involved with foreign women. Both narratives underscore the importance of adhering to wise counsel and the perils of forsaking wisdom for immediate gratification, with significant consequences resulting from their foolish actions. Thus, Samson's story can be reinterpreted to emphasise the moral lessons embedded within his narrative. His life, marked by both heroic deeds and personal flaws, serves as a cautionary tale about the importance of adhering to divine wisdom and the perils of succumbing to temptation. The recurring themes of trickery and deception in his interactions with women underscore the need for discernment and the dangers of deviating from a righteous path. Samson's fate, brought about by his own actions and choices, reinforces the foundational messages of the

Israelite authors about the consequences of straying from the teachings of Yahweh and the importance of living in obedience to divine commandments.

5.4 Synthesis

This chapter involved a close reading of the narrative of Judges 16 through a critical fabulation lens with the intention to get another image of Delilah. By applying reading methods from postmodern scholars with a focus on feminism and especially critical fabulations, I examine if there is a possibility that Delilah might have been the stereotypical foreign woman who was a metaphor for folly and the antithesis of wisdom. I compared the portrayal of Delilah in Judges 16 with the other portrayals of foreign women especially in Proverbs 1-9.

A brief exploration of Delilah's name was done, as names can carry significant cultural, historical, and personal meanings. Examining names and their associated personalities can reveal deeper insights into a character's traits, motivations, and transformations. For Delilah, her "multiple" personalities might symbolise the complexity of human identity and the different roles in which she was portrayed.

Frymer-Kensky's analysis suggests a nuanced view of her, highlighting the contrasting perceptions of women's actions based on their impact on Israelite society. Delilah is often portrayed as a "bizarro-universe" counterpart to Yael, who caused the death of another strong man, while Delilah uses her presence in Samson's house to strip him of his freedom. The femme fatale archetype is acknowledged as a multifaceted and evolving concept, with scholars contending that she should be perceived as an autonomous subject, embracing her destiny and finding liberation in interpersonal relationships. Delilah's role as a femme fatale is particularly compelling, as she uses her seductive abilities to uncover Samson's secret and betray him to his adversaries. The character of Delilah has been analysed and interpreted in various ways throughout history. Thomas de Vio Cajetan presents a more sympathetic interpretation of Delilah in his commentary on Judges 16, suggesting that she may have been of Hebrew descent. Salten (1931) portrays Delilah as a youthful and innocent girl, albeit still a Philistine, who

embraces faith in Samson's God and resists betraying him. Saint-Saëns (1877) offers a drastically different interpretation, characterizing Delilah as a Philistine priestess of Dagon who harbours deep animosity toward Samson. The name carries strong connotations of treachery and deceit, epitomizing the *femme fatale*, a woman who is both sexually alluring and lethal to men. The connection between Delilah and Judas in modern fiction further demonstrates the enduring influence of these archetypes in shaping societal views on betrayal and treachery.

The multifaceted character of Delilah was also explored in how it was interpreted in music, literature, and film. Exum (1996:178) examines the intricate relationship between music and narrative in Saint-Saëns' opera, drawing parallels to Calderon's identification of central figures in his painting. She suggests that Saint-Saëns guides his audience on how to interpret the music by situating it within its intended narrative context. The duet between Delilah and Samson, performed just before Samson succumbs to Delilah's seduction and subsequent betrayal, is intended to be heard with dramatic irony in mind. However, Exum challenges this prescribed listening approach by questioning whether the music's inherent eroticism and emotional intensity can be fully constrained by the libretto's narrative. The music's beauty and passion might transcend the treachery of Delilah's character, suggesting a dissonance between the sincerity conveyed by the musical score and the deceitful actions of the character. Snyder (2012:140) argues that Delilah is further depicted as a complex figure, attempting to justify her actions to the blinded Samson through a series of justifications relating to female weakness, her desire to retain him, and her loyalty to her god and country. DeMille's film suggests that Delilah is the younger sister of Samson's first wife, the Philistine woman from Timnah. Exum (1996:178) explores the interpretive flexibility inherent in Saint-Saëns' musical score by drawing comparisons to the discussions surrounding Calderon's depiction of the book of Ruth. The varied interpretations of Delilah's character illustrate the rich and intricate nature of her depiction in literature and commentary. Snyder (2012:109, 141) provides complex views on Delilah's character, contesting both traditional and feminist readings. Smith (1999:109) examines how feminists might approach a reinterpretation of Delilah's story, proposing that the biblical interpretation may not

be as inherently negative and patriarchal as traditionally believed. Snyder (2012:141) suggests that Milton's poem portrays Delilah as a figure who would have been praised by the Philistines, like the Hebrews' praise for Yael's actions. Klein (1993:65) argues that Delilah's loyalty to her cultural heritage is unjust, and the financial transaction suggests a form of 'prostitution'. However, Delilah's actions are often scorned by Israelite readers, and her demand to betray her lover is presented as a politically motivated act.

Delilah was also interpreted from a feminist perspective. Klein (1993:66) portrays Delilah as a multifaceted and resourceful woman who manipulates her lover's demise through love. The narrative's expectations of women taking advantage of men's vulnerabilities and condemning women who defy male expectations add complexity to Delilah's representation. Snyder (2012:141) highlights the importance of considering the biblical narrative from the standpoint of a woman participant or observer. Delilah can be seen as a patriotic individual, a commendable model of female independence, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency. Smith (1999:110) supports the perspectives of Danna Nolan Fewell (1992), who argues that traditional interpretations often overshadow Delilah, as she is often overshadowed by the heroic image of Samson. Fewell argues that Delilah transcends the typical antagonist role, serving as a critical figure within the narrative whose actions and motivations propel the storyline forward. Klein (1993:62) highlights Delilah's Philistine heritage, making her genealogy irrelevant in an Israelite context. Her betrayal of Samson for financial gain marks her as the most morally compromised of his lovers, casting her in a particularly negative light for the Israelite audience.

Delilah was examined as a dangerous seductress – the foreign women in biblical narratives and Proverbs. Tan (2008:65) suggests that the portrayal of foreign women in the Old Testament, particularly highlighting their depiction as seductresses, presents them as a danger to the Israelite protagonist. This theme is further reinforced in Proverbs, where the foreign woman is depicted as a symbol of danger and seduction. This motif reflects broader cultural concerns about female sexuality and its perceived threat to male integrity and societal stability. Exum (1996) discusses the perceived dangers that foreign women pose to Israel's ethnic

and religious identity, as well as the well-being of Israelite men. Deuteronomic laws forbid intermarriage with foreigners, emphasizing the fear that such marriages would lead Israelite men away from their faith and towards the worship of other gods. The book of Proverbs portrays foreign women as seductive and dangerous, capable of leading young men to moral and spiritual ruin. The narrator of the Samson story relies on existing biases against Philistines and foreign women, assuming that Delilah, being a Philistine, is inherently problematic. The narrative surrounding Delilah amplifies existing biases and stereotypes, making her a fitting representation of the archetypal dangerous foreign woman. Both portrayals emphasize the perceived threat that foreign women pose to the well-being and faithfulness of Israelite men, reinforcing the idea that such women must be avoided to maintain religious and moral integrity. Blyth (2017:60) suggests that these textual clues imply Delilah's involvement in prostitution, the historical identification of Delilah as a prostitute has been perpetuated by biblical interpreters since the early centuries of the Common Era. Josephus, a 1st-century Jewish historian, refers to Delilah as a Philistine harlot, while Pseudo-Philo conflates her with the Gaza prostitute mentioned in Judges 16:1. The comparison to Rahab, another biblical prostitute who lived independently, further reinforces this interpretation. Fisher, on the other hand, challenges this interpretation by arguing that the concept of "strange women" in Proverbs does not necessarily imply prostitution. Instead, these women are depicted as morally loose and dangerous, symbolizing the threat of temptation and destruction. Fisher's analysis highlights the distinction between the appearance and actions of a prostitute and the actual exchange of services for money. This perspective shifts the focus from prostitution to the broader theme of moral and sexual danger posed by such women. The use of terminology to emphasise otherness and the implicit hostility towards foreign women further complicates the portrayal of Delilah and similar characters in biblical literature. The figure of the "strange woman" in Proverbs represents a dysfunctional society characterised by cultural and cultic foreignness, making her a symbol of societal instability and moral decay. Her presence and actions are seen as undermining the foundational values of the community, posing a significant danger to the cohesion and continuity of the society. The wisdom literature uses her character to illustrate the consequences of

deviating from established norms and the potential for societal collapse when these norms are not upheld. Fisher (2019:116) explores the negative eroticism associated with the strange woman in Samson's narrative, which is portrayed as leading to spiritual and moral downfall. The story highlights Samson's interactions with foreign women, such as the Timnite, the harlot, and Delilah, and his extraordinary acts like killing a lion and destroying the house of Dagon. Niditch (2008) emphasizes the themes of trickery, vengeance, and counter-vengeance in Samson's narratives. Women are often seen as commodities of exchange, leading to deception and destabilization rather than stability. Samson's actions represent a deviation from righteousness, and his interactions with these women, particularly Delilah, lead to his downfall. Blyth (2017:62) points out that Delilah is often assumed to be in a sexual relationship with Samson, rooted in contemporary constructions of gender and sexuality. This assumption aligns with the broader theme of the strange woman, who is depicted as a morally loose and dangerous figure, embodying the ultimate threat to societal and religious stability. Delilah's role as a temptress and seductress is further reinforced by biblical scholars, who describe her as taking the active lead in her relationship with Samson, using her feminine allure to entice and betray him. This otherness and implicit hostility towards foreign women are emphasized by the wisdom literature's portrayal of the strange woman as a symbol of societal dysfunction and moral decay. Blyth (2017:63) discusses the broader implications of Delilah's actions and her impact on Samson's masculinity and mission, referring to Nancy Tischler and Roger Ryan's portrayals of her as a dangerous and manipulative figure. Frymer-Kensky and Exum argue that Delilah and Athaliah are Israelite women, with their foreignness rooted in their actions against Israelite institutions. They argue that villainy is a matter of behaviour rather than traits, and that the portrayal of women as seductive or threatening in biblical narratives reveals more about the men who created these stories than about the women themselves. They argue that the portrayal of women as foreign or villainous in biblical narratives is not an inherent truth but rather a reflection of male anxieties and perceptions. Leonard-Fleckman (2022:416) points out that the narratives of Samson highlight his relationships with women, which result in social discord and destabilization. Samson's arrogance and impulsiveness are the recurring problems, rather than the

women themselves. Exum (2016:4-5) presents the story of Samson as a warning that echoes the patriarchal advice in Proverbs, stressing the dangers women pose and the necessity of resisting their allure. Samson's actions, first with his Philistine bride and then with Delilah, defies his parents and the patriarchal norm that women should be submissive to men. His love and vulnerability empower these women, leading to his downfall.

Delilah was scrutinised as a possible literary figure and a metaphor for folly. In the biblical narrative of Judges 16, Delilah is often interpreted as embodying the characteristics of the foreign woman (Lady Folly) from Proverbs 1-9. Both figures use charm and deceit to lead men astray, resulting in their downfall. Delilah's manipulation of Samson uncovers the secret of his strength, leading to his capture and suffering. Her seductive nature extends beyond her physical allure to her words, which are deceptive and manipulative. However, the biblical text's silence on these aspects opens the door to multiple interpretations. Some scholars argue that Delilah's character is far from one-dimensional, with her disguise being a key trait of nineteenth-century hard-boiled and noir femme fatales. These women use their physical appearance to craft a deceptive exterior, effectively masking their true selves. This act of masquerade allows them to manipulate how they are perceived, blending appearance with reality. The ambiguity surrounding Delilah's identity, particularly her ethnicity and relationship with Samson, has led to multiple interpretations. Some scholars suggest that Delilah's actions are motivated not by national loyalty but by financial gain, complicating her characterisation as merely a foreign seductress. Feminist scholars argue that Delilah's actions may reflect a deeper loyalty to her people or a desire for personal survival in a patriarchal world that often vilifies autonomous women. In Proverbs 1-9, Lady Folly's role as a cautionary figure underscores the societal need to maintain cultural and religious purity amidst external influences. She is frequently used as an instructional trick to warn young men about the consequences of straying from the path of wisdom, represented by Lady Wisdom. Lady Folly is more than a literal figure of temptation; she represents the broader dangers of folly, sin, and the abandonment of wisdom, serving as a warning to resist seductive but destructive paths.

The last focus was on Samson and his weakness. That he might be the fallen hero; the man who could not resist folly and could not keep to divine regulations. Samson can be linked to the “man” (or son) who is warned about the foreign woman (Lady Folly) in Proverbs 1-9. Despite his strength and divine calling, he repeatedly falls for the allure of women who lead him away from his commitments and to his downfall. Samson’s story exemplifies the consequences of succumbing to such temptations, reinforcing the importance of adhering to the wisdom and understanding offered by Lady Wisdom. Samson's story is a complex tale of divine empowerment and human folly. The Spirit of the Lord empowers Samson to perform remarkable feats, such as killing a lion, thirty Philistines, and a thousand Philistines. However, these instances of divine strength are often followed by negative outcomes, such as broken vows and an unrelenting quest for revenge. This central theme in Samson's story is the conflict between his God-given abilities and his vulnerability to folly. Brennsinger highlights several critical aspects of Samson's conduct before his encounter with Delilah. Samson's decision to marry a Philistine woman without seeking parental advice demonstrates disregard for legal and parental guidance, reflecting a broader Israelite inclination to act on personal desires. This decision highlights Samson's impulsiveness and vulnerability to folly, driven by his attraction to physical beauty rather than wisdom or counsel. The Lord orchestrated events to create a pretext for action against the Philistines, underscoring divine sovereignty. Samson's behaviour serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of forsaking wisdom for immediate gratification. Miles (2004:75-76) portrays a scene where the poet observes a young man who epitomises naivety and susceptibility to enticement. This young man's lack of common sense and presence in a morally doubtful area mirrors Samson's impulsive decision to marry a Philistine woman without seeking his parents' counsel. Both narratives underscore the importance of adhering to wise counsel and the perils of forsaking wisdom for immediate gratification, with significant consequences resulting from their foolish actions. Samson's story can be reinterpreted to emphasize the moral lessons embedded within his narrative. His life, marked by heroic deeds and personal flaws, serves as a cautionary tale about the importance of adhering to divine wisdom and the perils of succumbing to temptation. The

recurring themes of trickery and deception in his interactions with women underscore the need for discernment and the dangers of deviating from a righteous path.

Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study has interrogated the multifaceted character of Delilah as presented in Judges 16, diverging from traditional interpretations that frame her solely as the archetypal femme fatale. Through a critical framework informed by postmodernism, feminism, and critical fabulation, the study argues that Delilah should be understood as more than just a metaphor for folly; she also reveals the vulnerabilities of patriarchal constructs and the complexities of female agency within a patriarchal context. As seen discussed in the earlier chapter(s), postmodernism has influenced biblical hermeneutics, particularly through its focus on the reader's active role in shaping the meaning of texts. Postmodern hermeneutics diverges from traditional modern approaches, which prioritise authorial intent and objective interpretations. Instead, postmodernism emphasises the reader's engagement with the text, acknowledging that meaning is constructed through the interaction between the reader and the text. This shift is critical in understanding Judges 16, as it allows for a reading that considers Delilah's agency and the power dynamics at play beyond the author's original intent.

Furthermore, I make use of the work of scholars such as Perdue and Kočí to explore how postmodern methodologies facilitate a re-examination of Delilah's narrative that diverges from conventional interpretations. The principles of postmodernism, particularly its focus on deconstruction, permit a critical analysis of the power structures inherent within the text. Additionally, this approach allows for the portrayal of Delilah not merely as a singular embodiment of evil but as a symbol influenced by the cultural anxieties prevalent in her historical context.

Key findings include the identification of Delilah as a representation of cultural anxieties surrounding foreign influence, particularly through her alignment with the characteristics of foreign women depicted in biblical wisdom literature. This analysis drew parallels between Delilah and figures in Proverbs that symbolise folly and seduction, Yael, who caused the death of another strong man, nurtured Sisera into

a false sense of security before killing him, whereas Delilah used her presence in Samson's house to strip him of his freedom, suggesting that Delilah represents a warning narrative reflecting broader fears about cultural assimilation and loss of identity. Additionally, the application of critical fabulation has allowed for a deeper exploration of her motivations, suggesting that her portrayal as treacherous serves less to vilify her and more to reinforce societal norms regarding gender, power dynamics, and cultural purity.

6.2 Answering the Research Question

To address the research question, "Can Delilah be seen as the stereotypical foreign woman who was a metaphor for folly?", this study suggests that Delilah indeed embodies elements of the stereotypical foreign woman in the biblical narrative. However, rather than relegating her to a mere representation of folly, it is essential to recognise that Delilah's character operates on multiple levels. She not only symbolises a cautionary figure warning against the seductions of foreignness but also reflects the male anxieties of cultural infiltration that challenge the stability of Israelite identity.

Thus, while Delilah can be classified as a metaphor for folly in alignment with the characteristics of foreign women in wisdom literature, her characterisation also points to a more nuanced understanding of gender roles, power dynamics, and the complexities behind her relationships with male figures, particularly Samson. This layered interpretation challenges simplistic categorisations and invites further exploration of the social, political, and cultural ramifications of her narrative.

6.3 Addressing the Research Aims

The primary aim of the research was to examine Delilah's portrayal as a metaphor for folly while revealing the weaknesses of Samson as a ruler and judge. The findings suggest that Delilah's character foregrounds the themes of folly and betrayal that resonate within the larger narrative of Judges. Specifically, her actions can be viewed as a product of the socio-political context in which she operates,

wherein her agency is simultaneously constrained and offered as an avenue for exploration within patriarchal constraints.

Moreover, Delilah serves to highlight Samson's own weaknesses as a leader. His susceptibility to her allure and manipulation emphasises not only his individual flaws but also the fragility of the societal structures built to uphold patriarchal authority. This duality within the relationship underscores the dangers that accompany the intertwining of power, sexuality, and cultural identity, foregrounding Samson's failure as a leader who succumbs to folly rather than exemplifying wisdom. Interesting is the link between Samson and Solomon. Solomon who is seen in the Old Testament and in Judaic thoughts as the exemplification of wisdom, could also not resist getting involved with foreign women.

6.4 Main Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to the existing literature in several significant ways. First, it enriches the discourse surrounding female representation in biblical texts, challenging the reductionist view of Delilah as merely a treacherous figure. By employing critical fabulation alongside feminist and postmodern theories, this study illustrates the necessity of considering Delilah's agency, identity, and socio-political context.

Second, it advances our understanding of the interplay between gender and cultural identity in the biblical narrative. Delilah's characterisation as a foreign woman sheds light on the broader narrative dynamics concerning the role of female figures in reinforcing and subverting patriarchal norms. It complicates the binary of virtuous versus treacherous womanhood, urging a more nuanced approach to how women's roles are represented and interpreted.

Finally, the study's methodological contributions, particularly its use of critical fabulation, open new avenues for scholarly exploration of marginalised voices in biblical literature. By weaving historical context with imaginative reconstruction, the research calls for more inclusive readings that prioritise the complexity of biblical narratives beyond their traditional interpretations.

6.5 Limitations and Weaknesses of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. One notable limitation is the focus primarily on textual analysis, which may not fully capture the socio-historical context in which the text was produced. As argued by Brettler in the third chapter, recent decades have witnessed a notable shift in scholarly focus toward the book of Judges, which constitutes an important theme addressed in the chapter. Historically, texts such as Judges were eclipsed by the prominence of the Torah and prophetic literature; however, they have now emerged as pivotal components of biblical scholarship. The chapter examines whether Judges should be regarded as a historical narrative that encapsulates the pre-monarchic era, like Lucian's historical methodologies, or if it fulfils a more nuanced theological and literary role. This inquiry raises alternative questions regarding the interpretative framework for Judges, particularly considering its fragmented storytelling and inherent moral complexities. Moreover, a comprehensive archaeological and historical analysis of the time would provide additional depth to understand further the cultural dynamics that shaped the narrative of Delilah and Samson.

Additionally, while the critical frameworks employed offer fresh perspectives, there exists the possibility of imposing contemporary understandings of gender and agency onto ancient texts. Such an imposition may risk anachronism, failing to appreciate the complexities of the historical context that informed biblical narratives.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Given the findings and limitations of this study, future research should consider several avenues for further exploration. First, a comparative analysis of Delilah with other biblical female figures, including Ruth, Bathsheba, and Jezebel, could yield deeper insights into the portrayal of women with similar attributes across the texts. Such an analysis may highlight the shifting representations of female agency and foreignness in relation to Israelite identity.

Second, interdisciplinary studies that incorporate archaeological findings and historical methodologies would augment textual readings, enabling scholars to construct a more robust understanding of the socio-political landscape during which these narratives were created. This approach could also contribute to the field of biblical archaeology by examining material culture and its implications for understanding women's roles and social status within ancient Israel.

Lastly, future research could benefit from expanded examinations of the reception history of Delilah in various cultural contexts, including literature, art, and media adaptations. Understanding how Delilah's character has been reinterpreted over time reveals the evolving perceptions of femininity and foreignness, which remain relevant in contemporary discussions surrounding gender representations.

6.7 Conclusion

This study serves as a call to re-evaluate the narrative of Delilah and her complex contributions to the themes of folly, agency, and cultural anxiety within the biblical text. By foregrounding her character in a critical framework that transcends traditional interpretations, the research not only enriches our understanding of Delilah herself but also opens pathways for broader discussions regarding silenced voices, female representation, power dynamics, and the intricate interplay of gender, culture, and identity in biblical literature. In celebrating the multiplicity of interpretations surrounding Delilah, we gain a more profound appreciation for the enduring relevance of these narratives in contemporary discourse, which continues to grapple with questions of gender, power, and cultural belonging.

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