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**THE IMAGE OF WOMAN'S SEXUALITY IN TIGRIGNA ORAL
POETRY**

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aimed at investigating the image of a woman in Tigrigna oral poetry and gender relationship in the Tigrigna community through the milieu of the image of woman's sexuality.

Methods: The study was carried out through qualitative data collection. The primary data for this study has been collected from field work and the secondary data has been collected from scholarly writings and relevant documents written about the Tigrigna oral poetry.

Results: The significance of this study is enormous as it sheds light in to the deep-rooted cultural connotations regarding women as subordinates or downright inferior to men. The study has also contributed in identifying prevalent attitudes regarding women representation in the Tigrigna oral poetry.

Recommendations: The study recommended that it is of paramount importance that one looks critically into the context of the oral poems and songs and attempt to correct them in a way they serve the modern day gender relationships of the contemporary Tigrigna society. Culture is a societal heritage and oral songs and poems constitute a bulk of the literature that harbors it. As such it should benefit the society by which it is made and to which it is designed to benefit. This can be done only with critical analysis and polishing of the literature from time to time, thereby creating awareness in the society that uses it to address the issues that might portray a section of its members, such as women in an adverse manner. Children who grow up hearing and reciting those songs and poems should be put in to consideration because their gender relationship will be influenced by the image of a woman in their oral poems and songs.

Keywords: *Image, woman's sexuality, Tigrigna, oral poetry*

1.0 Introduction of the Study

As part of the rich heritage of African oral literature, which has been at the heart of African culture and civilizations, the Tigrigna language of Eritrea boasts a rich oral literature, which has also been an integral part of the Eritrean people's culture and history. One of the genres of oral literature is oral poetry. As such, oral poetry is revered by the Tigrigna community and holds a high place in their way of life. However, the oral poetry of the Tigrigna has not been adequately studied and there are some discrepancies in the representation of men and women, which manifest themselves in Tigrigna oral poetry. This article aims to investigate the image of a woman in Tigrigna oral poetry and gender relationship in the Tigrigna community through the milieu of the image of woman's sexuality. By looking into the lyrical and non lyrical oral poems, it has presented the ways in which oral poems promote patriarchy.

The image of woman's sexuality in Tigrigna oral poems and songs has been given a core value; it seems, in the past as well as in the poems of today. On the one hand the image of a woman in many of the oral poems is one of a physical object; either as a beautiful or ugly to behold, rather than one of internal character and personality. On the other hand the expression of one's physical attributes by a woman is met with stiff resistance and rebuke and usually seen as a perpetuation or attraction of male sexual violence on them. The main reason for this kind of presentation of a woman is the overriding sense of sexism inherent in patriarchal societies of not only Eritrea but also many African countries. Mazuri writes, "There are three levels of sexism in the world-benevolent, benign, and malignant. There are also three levels of redemption from sexism for the Black woman-liberating the Black woman, centering the Black woman, and empowering the Black woman...We define benevolent sexism as a form of discrimination which is protective or generous towards the otherwise underprivileged gender. Gallantry and chivalry in defense of a woman's honor is a form of benevolent" (Mazuri, 1993). It is this kind of sexist attitudes which have held the woman in Tigrigna society ransom to strict codes of dressing and inhibition in social and economic activities.

The sexist attitudes of men are manifest in different ways. As can be seen in the poems and songs analyzed in this article, a woman's sexuality is manipulated by male sexist attitudes in the form of praise or criticism of the woman's body and her worth. Therefore the issue of woman's sexuality revolves around man's sexist attitudes and is usually exacerbated to levels in which it becomes impossible for the woman to think outside of her looks and physical attributes. In Tigrigna oral poetry, sexist attitudes are manifest in the portrayal of the image of the woman as only one of a sexual being with little weight being given to her thought, personality, character or leadership qualities. In this article the issues of woman's sexuality and man's sexism and male apathy to woman's sexuality, has been analyzed in the oral songs and poems popular of Tigrigna communities of Eritrea.

1.1 The Image of a Woman as a Sexual Object

አዋልድዶ ስኢንካ ሓደማት ተናዲዮ። meaning: *why are you looking for divorcees, can't you find virgins?* This is a line from a common wedding song, sung by men. It is common among the Tigrigna communities of Eritrea. The song signifies how little thought the Tigrigna society, especially of the old days gave a woman that a man was advised to marry a virgin girl and not opt for a divorced woman, no matter what the circumstances of the divorce were or how good her character might have been. The song clearly advises one against looking for a divorced

woman where they could apparently easily find virgin girls. The surprising thing is that people across the Tigrigna ethnic community dance to the tune of this dance when it is sung in weddings and take it light-heartedly. But it is very hard to think that this misogynistic song, which does not even care to explain what kind of a man it is referring to or try to question his background, can go without imprinting a serious psychological connotation in the gender relationship of the Tigrigna society, especially on those young ones who grow up hearing it.

A woman’s worth is here determined by her sexual “purity” because the society usually held virgin girls to be faithful to their first husbands because they are considered not only “pure” in the flesh but also “innocent” at heart. However; if a woman is known to have been married and was divorced from her husband, the connotation is that she is not a “good” wife that can keep a husband. The integrity of the man is not put into consideration, while that of the woman is strictly scrutinized. Therefore she is seen only as good as her sexual status.

ዓይና ሓባል መዓከራ ዘባል *She is cross-eyed and her hips are unbalanced,*
 ዝባን በቕሊ ኣብይዋ ምቕባል። *she won't even fit on the mule's back.*

The above song is a wedding song which is common in the Tigrigna communities of Eritrea. It is sung light-heartedly, as it is supposed to be a “custom” that girls sing it on weddings. However, the pain it can cause the woman, especially if it has to do with real physical features that affect her confidence and attach a stigma later in life, there is no way one can classify this custom as anything but an unfortunate practice.

The following song is a wedding song, which is sung by girls from the groom’s camp. It is common in the Tigrigna communities of Eritrea. It basically attacks the bride for being “too old” for the groom. It goes on as follows:

ኣበይ ድኣ ኔርኪ *Up until now, where have you been?*
 ክልተ ምወለድኪ። *you are old enough to have two children.*

The song insults the young woman because of her age. This is another example of treating a woman as a sexual object who has to be young and more attractive physically for the pleasure of man. There is no indication as to whether the groom himself is young or old. But a woman is considered inferior if she doesn’t have the body of a young female, which the man can be amused with, regardless of his own age or other characteristics. Here the emphasis of the image of a woman, once again is not on her character but on her body as a sexual object.

In the bridal party which takes place at the house of the bride to give her a sending off by her friends in the Tigrigna communities of Eritrea, the following lines are among the common: ኣብ ቦኸሪ ኢይይ ነቲዓ ለመን ኣጆኺ ሓብተይ ካብዚኣ ሰሙን። meaning: A lemon has blossomed in my hand, be brave my sister a week from now. In this song the girls are aware that their friend, who is being given in marriage has no choice but to have sex with her groom come the wedding day and they are encouraging her to be brave. This is a tacit acknowledgement of the fact that a woman is being given away as a sexual object who has to go through sexual experiences which is going to be almost her duty to her husband. The image of a woman as a sexual object is further highlighted by oral poems such as: ካብ ናተይይ ናተን በሊዱ ደግዲጎምኹምይ ከይተጋይዱ። meaning is theirs[genital] better than mine, for you to look for others and get beaten, which signifies that a

man got beaten when he got involved in a sexual triangle outside of his marriage that the voice of the wife in this song shows that the woman is mystified because it is all about a female genital issue; more evidence of the image of a woman as a sexual object in the Tigrigna oral songs. A very similar song goes on: ኣብ ገዛኹም ከሎ ኩሉ ሙሉ፡ ቀተሉኹምዶ ይግባይ ዘይብሉ። meaning: when you have it all [sex] here in your home, have they killed you now and you can't even appeal? Songs like this reduce the woman to a mere sexual object who is at the disposal of the man. Even though this song again has a female voice as its narrator, the song is also sung by men in weddings and it is a misogynistic one because it confines the essence of marrying a woman is merely for sex. The expression ኣዳነየ ሰለፈን ብርላ፡ ከዳ ከዳ ማይ ከምዝወርዳ። meaning: my best friend whose thighs are of fine glass, here she goes as if fetching water, portrays the image of a woman as a sexual object because it is a connotative accusation that the woman is pretending to go fetch water, while her true intention is sexual mischief. The expression of the woman's thighs as "fine glass" is very important here because it signifies that it can be broken, implying that the girl is on her way to losing her virginity. The following expressions from wedding songs denigrate the woman as a sexual object by directly referring to her body and neglecting any other attributes that a woman has as a human being. ሓርፋፍ ጎድኒ ከም ኣባ ጩጉራ፡ ከልቢ ክትኮን ተሪፍዎ ጩራ።, meaning: *Rough skinned like a hairy worm, give her a tail and you have a dog.* Another oral song that denigrates the woman by taking her physical attributes and reducing her to nothing if she is not beautiful to look at is: ገዛፍ ክብዲ ከም ወያ ሓሰማ፡ ንስኪዶ ደሊኺ ውሽማ፡ ዓጽሚ ሂቡ ከልቡ ዘኪሽማ።, meaning *Big bellied like a pig, even you want an affair, a dog can give you a bone and sleep with you.* These are wedding songs sung to taunt the bride by girls from the groom's village. No one is clear about how the tradition originated but some of the songs are very offensive and can at times be very personal and demeaning. More importantly the image of a woman in those kinds of oral songs is that of a sexual object, who is acceptable and respected if she is beautiful and rejected and denigrated if otherwise; her character and other qualities unconsidered. A woman is also teased in wedding songs by men if she fails to attract a male after having groomed and beautified herself: እንታይ እየ ገይረ ነይረ? ካብ ዝቐነን ወርሕን ሰሙንን ገይረ። meaning: *Oh, what have I sinned, it has been a month and a week since I got braided.* Clearly the emphasis of the oral wedding songs is on beauty and good looks as stipulated by the sexist and misogynistic society which reduces the woman's worth to only her physical body as a sexual object.

1.2 The Image of a Woman's Sexuality and Shame

In Africa, the woman is usually held to a different standard when it comes to sexuality than her male counterpart. While the man is tolerated for various aspects of sexuality such as polygamy, adultery, and sometimes even rape, the woman is expected to always be on her guard and found to be reproachable if otherwise. According to Guy Shef-tall, 2003, "Black woman of Africa suffers a threefold oppression: by virtue of her sex, she is dominated by man in a patriarchal society; by virtue of her class she is at the mercy of capitalist exploitation; by virtue of her race she suffers from the appropriation of her country by colonial or neo-colonial powers. Searism, racism, class division; three plagues." In the Tigrigna society, the oral songs and poems reflect an image of a woman who is held to this kind of double-standard by the society.

ቀይኽ ወዲ ክሳዱ ለሚነ

Fair boy, whose neck is like lemon

ኣደን ጓልን ክባልዓሉ ኢሉን።
him

mother and daughter are up in arms for

The above oral song is sung in weddings by men. It is common in the Tigrigna communities of Eritrea. This kind of song is called *eedere* (gossip song) and is sung on weddings after the return of the bride to her family home from her honeymoon or during the New Year Holidays to point out and criticize whatever sexual immoralities are said to have taken place in the society during the past year. On the surface this song is aimed at giving tribute to the young man who is being praised for his fair skin and long neck, which are considered to be of pleasant looks in a man. However; it is a veiled attack on a certain mother and her daughter who have been allegedly interested in the young man. That way, a woman is shamed and rebuked in the society and her name is defamed to a level which can affect her credibility and reputation in the society and across the surrounding villages as a whore.

ህያቡዮ ህያቡ ዕብዲ

Hyabuye Hyabu crazy

ዓሰብ ከይዳ ሰብኣይ ከተናዲ።

she went to Assab in search a man.

The above song is another *eedere* song sung by boys and girls. It is common in the Tigrigna communities of Eritrea. Its aim is to shame a woman who goes in search of work to the port city of *Assab* of Eritrea. The name *Hyabu* has been selected randomly but the song goes for any woman who goes to Assab even under dire circumstances because the general assumption is that women who go there are going there to become sex workers as the city is very far from the mainland Tigrigna populated areas and the risk of being noticed by neighbors, relatives and people who know them is very minimal. Therefore the song is sung in the Tigrigna oral songs under different names at a time, depending on who has gone to *Assab* in search of work. This limits the independence of a woman to pursue her career. It defames and shames a woman from being free to do whatever she believes in doing to improve her life because she is under the constant judgment of a society which criticizes her with its tradition of *eedere* songs with such impunity, merely because it is the “custom”.

ኣብ ጉንዲ ዕረ

Around the bush

ባዕላ ትሕረ።

she just throws herself

The above *eedere* song is sung by boys and girls in party during the return of a bride from her honeymoon or during the New Year Holidays. In this particular song any girl who is gossiped to have frequented the bushes with some lover to have illicit sexual affair, is shamed and defamed without naming her name but implying her identity. Here the male character or characters if any is not even mentioned. The shame of the alleged sexual immorality goes solely to the woman. Thus the image of a woman is denigrated while the man or men who is or are her alleged partner or partners in the whole affair is or are given a pass; a further indication of the uneven-handed and misogynistic patriarchal nature implied in Tigrigna oral songs and poems.

ወለላ ቀይሕ ቈምሽጣ

Welela whose underwear is red

ኣብ እንዳ ሓሰር ከይዳ ሸርጫጣ።
prostituted.

she went to the haystack and

The above song is also an *eedere* sung by girls, boys and men. It is sung to shame a woman, who has been randomly called here as *Welela*. The name is used interchangeably from village to village and from time to time, depending whose reputation of sexual immorality is trending in the season in villages in the Tigrigna community. It alleges that a woman named *Welela*, in this song has committed a one act of adultery and has been called a hore or a prostitute for that. The song doesn't give any reference to the man or men involved in the alleged sexual immorality. It doesn't even indicate that the woman named as *Welela* had done it on more than one occasion. However; as in the case of the previous oral song, the male counterpart has been given a pass; while *Welela* has been name and shamed.

ቀሺ በላዕ መኸፈልቲ

O priest, who collects gifts

በቲ ከይደን ክሸርምጣ ለይቲ።

while she bitches at night.

The above *eedere* is sung by boys, girls, men and women. It is sung to taunt a certain priest, whose wife is allegedly having sexual affairs by going outside of the house while the priest is being invited to eat food donated to him by the faithful. It is a criticism, both of the wife who is alleged to have been having the illicit sexual affair and of the priest who is unable to control his own wife but still goes to preach and eat food and collect alms from the faithful. The prayer services of the Orthodox denomination start at the small hours of the morning and can last almost the whole afternoon, and then the priests are invited to the houses of the faithful. That is the time when the wife is alleged to be sneaking out to have the sexual affair. By singing these kinds of songs and shaming the priest, who should not, according to the order of the church, be allowed to continue ministry, if indeed his wife is having an affair outside the bond of marriage, the *eedere* song serves the society's aim of rebuking and exposing illicit immoralities to cleanse the community.

ቅጩ ፈኖየ ቅጩ ፈኖየ

Bread of fine flour,

አብ ዓዲ ቐጢና አውዲአ ተሃነየ።

in Adi Qetina I quenched my desire.

The above song is an *eedere* song sung by boys to discourage girls from going to the traditional gold mines. It common in the village of *Adi Qetina* of the Southern Zone of Eritrea. The song gives the image that a woman who goes there has only one interest; i.e. sex. Therefore even if the woman goes gold-digging, in the original sense of the word, for the sake of it, and is innocent of any sexual immorality, the blanket oral song of *eedere* sung to alert the society and rebuke the protagonists if they are truly culprits in the story, still shames and defames the woman and not the man or men who the woman is allegedly said to be having affairs. It uses a female voice but it is also sung by boys and men as well as women. The song gives the image of a woman who is portrayed as a sex-monger who quenched her thirst for sex by going in to the tunnels of the *Adi Qetina* traditional gold mines. No indication of a repetition is given and no male names are implicated in the song. But no self-respecting girl, who has the hopes of getting married in a respectable way would dare risk damaging her reputation by going for the gold mines and hence she will be just inhibited to remain in her house, even if dire economic situations demand that she work in the mines and earn money.

አረ ዓባይያ ክንዲ ማሕጸ

O, she is as big as it gets,

አብ በረኻ ሒዞቶም ትቕጹ።

and dances with boys in the woods.

The above *eedere* song which is sung by boys, girls, men and women. It alleges that a certain older woman is fooling around with young boys in the wilderness. She is portrayed as a big woman in this instance. And in other instances signs of implicit identification would be used to refer to the person without addressing them by name. But; as the *eedere* songs are a result of some gossip which has already been brewing in the community and waiting for the opportune moment to be composed in the form of songs. The essence of the *eedere* songs such as the above are that, either the alleged perpetrator will stop behaving in the way she is said to have been doing or the boys will know that the community is watching and will stop going out with her. *eedere* songs may not be admissible in any legal process but they are hugely believable and damage, defame and shame the image of the woman who is implicated in it.

1.3 The Image of Apathy for a Woman and her Sexuality

The image of a woman and her sexuality receives not much sympathy from the male dominated patriarchy-oriented oral songs and poems in the Tigrigna literature. Even in marriage a woman doesn't have much say about her sexuality and sexual preferences in the way she would want to live it. As in most parts of Africa it is the man who dictates the sexual behaviour of the woman. According to Mismang, 2002, "...as a feminist, the notion that I would participate in a heterosexist institution that serves as legal contract that gives men exclusive sexual rights over women, and decrees that children born within its boundaries are 'legitimate', was disturbing. As a heterosexual feminist, I had to decide whether the exercise of the 'privilege' of marriage and the social legitimacy it brings with it, was something I wished to exercise." And in Tigrigna society, the woman's sexuality after marriage is at the mercy of her man and any misbehaviour and violation of conduct is met with little sympathy from the society.

The following song is a wedding song sung by boys. The young boys who peep on the door-holes of the groom's house in which he has just brought the bride for their first sexual encounter sing in the darkness. The aim of the young boys is to ascertain whether the bride is indeed a virgin or not. They scoop around the place, listening for any cry from the bride. If she resists too much or if she is afraid to have sexual intercourse with the man, and takes long to comply, the boys start singing very grotesque songs which are not considerate of the privacy and dignity of the woman. The song doesn't show any sympathy for her. Instead, she is made to feel insecure with more songs of the same nature, which she can hear being sung by young village men and boys who peep in through the dark cracks on the door of the bridal room, and listen to every cry she makes as she loses her virginity, almost the entire night until she finally succumbs to his advances and is overwhelmed in what can be considered a legal rape.

The following song is another wedding song sung by boys.

ኣብቲ ስግር ማዕዶ
corner,

In the dark corner, in the dark

ፍሉኽ ን ትብል ፈሪሓዶ?

here she creeps, with too much fear.

If she refuses to comply and resists to have sex, with her groom in the night because of whatever reason she might have, there is no understanding from the society as to whether she is ready or not to have sex at that particular moment. Similarly several demeaning songs are relentlessly sung until finally the bride gives in to the pressure of the groom, whose reputation as a masculine and potent man in the community matters highly to him gets his way and avoids ridicule.

Another taunting wedding song sung by boys in weddings is the following.

ሃብዮ ሃብዮ እምበረ
him,

Just give it to him, girl give it to

እንዳጨው ድዩ እንዳበርበረ?
pepper.

it's not a container for salt or

By “it”, they meant the woman’s genital, of course. This shows how little regard there is for a woman’s sexuality that her mostly futile resistance to avoid sex without some dignity and by mutual consent at the time of her convenience is found to be contemptible and has resulted in such a song. Girls who grow up hearing this kind of song will definitely find it difficult to have a high level of self-esteem and a sense of equal say in terms of deciding about the most intimate act that they would have in their married life. Boys, on the other hand, will grow up in the Tigigna society that, come the day of their wedding, they could take for granted the issue of having sex at the time of their own choosing, regardless of what their sexual partner felt about the act. All they have to do, they would feel, is just demand it and they would always expect to have their way.

In the town of *Segheneiti* of the Southern Zone of Eritrea live two oral poetry depositaries, who have graced literally every *Festival of Cultural Expo* since the independence of Eritrea in 1991 with their recital and knowledge of oral poems and songs. Between them, they have won a number of individual awards as well as awards for their Sub Zone. They have also been well recognized in the country’s mass media for their knowledge of oral literature. The following oral poem was recited by Ato Hadish, who is an oral poet himself and it was corroborated in exactly the same wording by his compatriot Bashai Kidane, who is also a poet. He explained to the author of this article that it is a poem which he incited himself. He said that a long time ago he was invited for a wedding of his best friend’s. His friend, himself a renowned poet was reputed for his having been a womanizer. Hadish said he was unhappy at being ignored by the friend, at whose house he was invited because, apparently, the host was busy talking to city women. The disappointed Hadish recited a poem accusing his host of paying too much attention to the city women who were invited to the wedding. The essence of the image of a woman in the society is in the poetic response that Ghebremedhin immediately recites. It goes as follows:

እንታይ ኢለዮን ነዘን ዝስርሓ
everyone,

why would I go for those who are for

ኣብርሀተይ ከላትኒ ቀደሕ ብቐይሓ
ones?

while I got Abrhet, the fairest of the fair

ካብ ናተን ጽራይሲ ናታ ኣስር ውሃ

I prefer her brew to their wine,

ካብ ናተን ነጫ ናታ ኣግሓ

I prefer her bread to their fine food,

ሎምስ ተመሊሰ ናብ ንስሓ

now I have returned to confession,

ከምኡ እንድዩ ዝገብር ጽፋይ ኣርሓ

that is what a great bull does,

ሰሪሩ ሰሪሩ ዝምለስ ናብ ኣሓ።

mates with many and returns to his shed?

In this poem, the speaker is very much aware of what was at stake and chooses his words very craftily because there were many invited guests including his own in-laws. Besides it gives the sense that he loved and respected his wife. Be that as it may, the poem gives an image of the society's misogynistic attitude that men can womanize all they wanted not only with impunity but that they were in fact to gain admiration for it. The speaker admits openly that he had been running after other women in front of everyone; however, he gives the conclusion that it was a mark of a hero. And the woman is expected to just wait for her man to come after he got tired of fooling around for a while and settle to be a family man at the twilight of his life.

1.4 The Image of a Woman and Morality

ወይኒ ጥፍተይ እንዳበልና ጸፈፋ

While we believed our sister Weini was chaste,

አጢማቶ ሰለፋ አንዲፋ።

she just gave him, stretching her legs.

The above song is a wedding song sung by boys and girls. The song demonstrates that it is only the woman who is considered unchaste for having lost her virginity before marriage. The man, who is responsible for it, is not even mentioned. It speaks of a certain young woman, named *Weini*, who is believed to have stunned her family when it was found out in the aftermath of her wedding that she was not a virgin. As there was no suspicion about her behavior that she had known a man, when the groom testified that he didn't find her "chaste", she was chastised by this song and is made immortalized in a negative way as a lesson for the Tigrigna society that virginity test was indeed the only reliable way of confirming if a woman is indeed a virgin. Obviously nature has made woman to be the only party who is found out with virginity test, at least the traditional way. However, the Tigrigna society's expectation that only the woman be held accountable for sexual immorality leaves the man in the society to act with a tremendous level of impunity and the woman to be chastised and shamed throughout her entire life to a point that even the family name and pride could be tainted as a result.

The following song is an *eedere* song sung by boys, and men. It is sung to ridicule the shaming of a certain girl was said to have lost her virginity before her marriage and according to the customary tradition was deemed to return to her parents' home on donkey's back forced to wear rags as a punishment. After it was known that it was a certain man, named so and so who had violated her, the community sang an *eedere* for her.

እንታይ ደክለይ ዝገብሮ እንታይ ደክለይ
do,

Oh what am I going to do, what will I

እንሌ ሽራራይ ፈቲሎለይ።

so and so untied my belt, what will I do?

The young woman in the song is violated by a certain man named *Weldemariam*, but she is seen clearly to have been worried deeply because of the way the community would treat her after it is discovered that she had lost her virginity. The man is not criticized or worried of any retribution by the act. It is the woman who would be considered to be a "slut" and face the furious attack of the society; in this case in the form of a scandal song of *eedere*. This way the poem shames woman in society for any sexual immorality that takes place.

The following song is an *eedere* song sung by boys, girls, and men. Once again the song has a female voice as a narrator. It shows how a woman was waiting in vain for a marriage proposal which was not forthcoming. The speaker of the song is a woman but the song is sung by men.

Therefore it is possible that men created the song in the absence of women's expressing themselves in a society which rebukes the outspokenness of a woman. The song narrates of a certain woman, who, having beautifying herself by being "braided" and waiting patiently for a whole month during which she anticipated to get a suitor who never came. It goes as follows:

እንታይ'የ ገደረ ኔረ?

What have I sinned?

ካብ ዝቐነን ወርሕን ሰሙንን ኔረ።
braided.

a month and a week since I was

The woman in the above song is a symbol of the sexist attitude that looks upon a woman as a sexual, object who had to keep looking sexy and attractive for her to be picked by a man. Regardless of what her character is a woman is considered unfit to get married if she is not sexy enough. That is why the woman in the song seems to be unable to comprehend what the reason was for her not being able to get selected, as was the norm. Then she starts contemplating about what "sin" she might have actually committed that she failed to attract a single suitor.

ጻል መሲላቶ መጺኡዮ

He came thinking she was a virgin

ጥራያ ጸኒላቶ ከይዱ ንባጽዑዮ።
Massawa

he found her broken and returned to

The above song is an *eedere* song which is sung by boys, girls, men and women. It is sung to ridicule a groom who found out that his bride was not a virgin and leaves her for that reason. The song indicates that the man married the woman because he thought that she was a virgin. Upon finding out that she was not he returned to where he came from, in this case the port city of Massawa of Eritrea.

If a bride is found to be virgin or "chaste" on the night of her wedding and the community is convinced that she was indeed a virgin by their various methods of eavesdropping, the following song is sung by boys, girls, men and women. It goes as follows:

ኣማኒት ተኣማኒትዮ

she is trustworthy, trustworthy

ጻለቦይ እገለ ተኣማኒትዮ።
worthy.

daughter of the so and so, she is trust

This song is sung as a tribute for the bride, a tribute for her parents, who are being praised by the same token, and a rebuke for those who are not as careful until the day of their wedding as her. These kinds of oral songs clearly indicate that the society puts a lot of emphasis on virginity and that a woman's worth is related to her being found careful without engaging the male counterpart.

1.5 The image of Woman's Sexuality and Sexism

ንጻረፍ እንተበልኪ ንዒ ሃያ
insult,

Be my guest if you say let's trade

ውሉድ ህበይ ዘይብላ መርኣያ

she-monkey, who is ugly to behold.

The above song is an *eedere* song sung in weddings and during the New Year Holidays by men. It is sung to chastise issues of a woman who refused to a man's advances and may be had thrown

insults toward him. Instead of tackling the matter of the disagreement head on, the song seems to have been taken in to the direction of attacking the woman's looks. Ironically the man who, just a few minutes ago had been showering the woman with praises, attacks the woman as an "ugly" person. This is a demonstration that the woman is to be considered worthy of standing up to a man if she happened not to be beautiful, vis-a-vi, a sexual object, who hasn't earned the right to do so because she is "ugly to behold".

The following song is an *eedere* song sung in weddings and during the New Year Holidays. It is a derogatory song that shows how unbecoming it is of a woman in the Tigrigna community to be considered fit to express herself if she doesn't have the physical beauty that a woman in the community is supposed to own. It goes as follows:

እንታይ ትብል'ዛ ኣረጊት ሙብሉል

What is this ugly old rascal saying?

ሸርጫጥ'ኳ ትምኒ ዘይተዋህልል
hore.

she is not worth a penny if she were a hore.

The prime for the composition of the song is the assumption that a woman has started saying something. It does not show whether whatever she had said was good or bad. All that one could gather from this song is that there is an incumbent sort of sanction by the song that if a woman is not beautiful enough, she hasn't earned her place in society to express herself. Therefore the woman is been presented here only as someone who has at all times to be a sexual object and a trophy woman regardless of her character. If she was beautiful, it seems that the society would be proud of her and give her the respect. As if she had bought her looks or as if she was responsible for her being born with the kind of physical attributes that she is endowed with, her status in the society is determined by it.

There are numerous ways in which Tigrigna oral poetry glorifies and pays tribute to a woman as a mother, as a wife, and as a daughter. And the aim of this article is not to shame and defame the overall enormous aesthetic quality of Tigrigna oral poetry. However, there is a danger in simply being awed by the magic of the aesthetics in the form of the genre, namely the indifference to the way it portrays a woman negatively. Therefore it is of a paramount importance that one looks critically in to the context of those oral poems and songs and attempt to correct them in a way they serve the modern day gender relationships of the contemporary Tigrigna society. Culture is a societal heritage and oral songs and poems constitute a bulk of the literature that harbors it. As such it should benefit the society by which it is made and to which it is designed to benefit. This can be done only with critical analysis and polishing of the literature from time to time, thereby creating awareness in the society that uses it to address the issues that might portray a section of its members, such as women in an adverse manner. Children who grow up hearing and reciting those songs and poems should be put in to consideration because their gender relationship will be influenced by the image of a woman in their oral poems and songs.

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