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Abstract

A Guileful Liar Deceives a Saint is a proverb as well as the title of a folktale in Tigrigna oral tradition. The full context of the tale explicates the proverb and does more. The nexus between the proverb and the tale helps a reader or a listener of the folktale to compare the message of the proverb with the message of the folktale. This tale explores what some of the concerns of the Tigrigna people were in the past. Among the pertaining issues of this folktale are: the need for telling the truth, the deplorableness of falsehood, the need for critical thinking, the consequences of lies, the need for trust, the importance of communication, the need to beware of the feeling of entitlement, the aspect of communality in Tigrigna society, the extent to which liars' schemes could reach, the end result of evilness, the need for not judging by outside looks, aspects of monastic life in Tigrigna community, and the role of the endowment of the tale.

Tigrigna Folktale

Tigrigna, one of nine languages spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia is a South-Semitic language of the Afro-asiatic language family. Arguably a descendant of the ancient *Geez* language, it has a close resemblance to Tigre language in Eritrea. Tigrigna has a rich Oral Literature, ranging from oral poetry, songs, folktales, mythologies, proverbs, riddles and various other types of traditional performances. These Oral Literature practices have been passed from generation to generation for hundreds of years. But they are still very much relevant to the lives of the Tigrigna people. The people use it in childhood, adulthood, weddings, funerals, community services, campaigns, wars, and religious activities, etc. So much so that it has become an integral part of the livelihood of the Tigrigna Ethnic group. Therefore, it is important that Tigrigna Oral Literature is researched and documented as it may unfold the deep meaning in the cultural mold of the population.

Tigrigna Folktale is known as *Tswtsway*, which could literary be translated as “tell-tale”. Tigrigna folk stories tell of a story that “happened” to a certain person or that a certain person had “done” a long time ago. They don’t refer to a particular time or span in their narration of events. Most of the time they are titled and their titles become proverbs which are suggestive in themselves of stories behind them. So, it is quite usual in Tigrigna communities to hear a saying only. But when you ask the people, they tell you the story behind the proverb and the moral message behind it. Some of the examples are *Knana* and *Mnana*, a story of the conjoined twins, *Man and Woman are Created from the Same Earth*, a story of a husband and wife gifted with the art of riddles, *He who Doesn’t Think Should Not Start Business*, about a man who invests his money without thinking through what he does, and so on.

It is important to study Tigrigna Oral Folktales because they carry in themselves a huge amount of cultural value and messages from generations past. These folktales not only serve as cultural windows to the past but are a means of transmitting them to new generations of Tigrigna communities. One can learn from them how womenfolk were regarded in Tigrigna societies of the past, how land was distributed and administered and what the life-style of the people was like in the past. They also have connotations of historical moments and by studying them one may learn about major events that had left their mark in the history of the Tigrigna communities, events such as wars, famines, pandemics, and so on as well as leaders’ prowess, chronicles and conquests which would otherwise have been left unrecorded. Tigrigna Folktales are also intertwined to Tigrigna proverbs as they sometimes serve as a background to explicate the proverbs themselves. They serve as the stories behind the proverbs, thus explaining why and when people came up with certain proverbs. They also carry a significant data of moral lessons. Even in the present time, many in the Tigrigna communities teach their children and grandchildren or their significant others wisdom and moral lessons through folktales. Important lessons such as the need for respect and peacefulness, and so on are transmitted orally. In those folktales one narrates the successes or failures of some character or characters in the hope that young people would draw inspiration to make better choices in life.

The Story

Once upon a time, two men happened to meet on the way to the market. One of them was going to sell off a farmhand whom he had owned because of a debt and the other man was going there to sell a mule. The farmhand had to be sold because

he was a liar. The mule, though glossy, had to be sold because it was wicked. The owner of the mule had had enough of its wickedness that he feared for his life and had come to the conclusion that it was better if he took it to the market and sold it. The farmhand was very obedient, hard-working and strong, but his master feared that he might spread guileful lies and create a fight for him with other people and cause him problems so he decided to rid himself off him and collect his money. As each man left from his respective village toward the market, they met by chance at a cross roads and they started chatting. On the way the man with the farmhand told the other that he was taking the young man to sell him. And the mule's owner said that he was taking the mule to the market to sell it. Then the owner of the mule asked, "Why are you letting loose such a strong-looking farmhand to other people?". The man with the farmhand answered, "He instigates trouble with neighbors, creates enmity between good friends, drives wedges between brothers and sisters and makes them go to war against each other. That's why I decided to get rid of him and live peacefully." The owner of the mule wasn't satisfied with the explanation given by the other man and said, "It looks like the problem is with you, my friend. You can't differentiate between a lie and truth. Why do you have to listen to what he says? Why don't you just ignore him?" The man with the farmhand answered, "No one else can tell me what my own problem is. You don't know what you are talking about because it hasn't happened to you. Instead of saying God shield us from a liar, you are telling me to just ignore what he says. Do you think I would want to lose such a strong young man to others if I didn't have enough reasons? However, leave mine affairs to me, I might as well ask why you want to sell such a leggy mule, yourself anyway?"

To this the mule-owner answered, "This mule starts moving amicably at first. Then it has something that disturbs her that I am worried she might throw me one day when I am least expecting it and I am worried she might cause me physical disability. That's why I am taking it to the market to sell it." The man with the farmhand said, "This is not right. You are just a coward; otherwise, you would easily ride her with a firm harness. What a tale! A strong man like you to sell such a fine animal because he is unable to break her! The world is full of interesting stories. This is unheard of. Think hard about what you are doing, my friend." The mule-owner said, "It is easier said than done. But, if we both think that the other one is exaggerating his problems, why don't we make exchange....?"

As he heard this, the man with the farmhand did not hesitate to accept the other man's offer. They agreed there and then. Thus, the man with the farmhand went back home with the troublesome mule while its owner took the lying farmhand. They were both happy and each thought that he had gotten the best deal. They thanked each other and each headed back to his village. As the man who bought the mule got closer to his village, he couldn't resist the temptation to try and ride the mule and so he did. But the mule waited until it found a narrow strait. Then it jerked and threw the man over a cliff and had him killed. The one who owned the farmhand however, got peacefully to his village, followed by his newly acquired young and strong aid.

Once at home, he called his wife and told her, “I have gotten this farmhand in exchange for our obstinate mule. As you can see, he is strong and will serve us well. However, I want to warn you about his one fault, which is that his previous owner told me to be careful because this farmhand can make the earth stick to the sky with his lies. Therefore, we should warn our relatives, neighbors, friends and acquaintances in our village and in the neighboring villages in advance not to heed his words lest he put us in to hostility and fight. I want you, especially to be very careful of him. You should never hear a word of what he says.” He warned his wife very seriously and repeatedly, just to make sure.

As the Tigrigna people say, ‘old habits go right to the death bed’, it didn’t take long for the farmhand to fall back to his old habit. As was usual with him, he devised new lies day and night to separate the man from his wife. But the husband and wife, had already discussed his behavior so they just ignored him and went about their business as if he didn’t matter. They only cared about the work he was doing for them. But one day he succeeded in his scheme and got them in his traps.

This happened one night after the man and his wife spent the evening invited at some relative’s house. They had come late and went to bed right away. When it was pitch dark, the farmhand came to their bed and poured water at the foot of their bed. As the husband and the wife had had a little too much to drink, they would get up for call of nature. The first to get up was the man. As he stepped on to the ground, his feet were soiled with wet mud and thought “Why is this woman unconscious like this? Can’t she even get up to urinate outside?” After the man came back to bed again, the woman got up to do the same. The lying farmhand realized that the water had dried so he had poured more water again. She also found her feet stuck on wet mud. The woman also thought, “Why is this man unconscious with drink like this? And why doesn’t he go out like a man to urinate? If I, a woman, am not scared, why does he have to be afraid of going out? Is he going to be eaten by a leopard?” After she came back, she wiped her feet and went to bed again. Even though the husband and wife never exchanged words about this, each had faulted the other in their hearts. As the lying-farmhand saw that in the morning, the husband and wife were normally having their breakfast, he was disappointed that his sinister plan did not work as he had hoped it would.

One day during harvest, the man invited his friends and relatives for a campaign to help him gather his crops. Among the helping hands were his in-laws. He sent his farmhand to the house to go fetch the guests some food and drink from the wife. The farmhand went to the village and told the wife that he was sent by her husband to bring food and drinks. While she was preparing the food and drink for him, she asked him about the harvest and about what the people there were singing. To this the farmhand answered, “They are singing *laoye.....laloye.....lalo.....* have you heard that the lady has wet her bed.....*laloye..... laloye..... lalo.*” The women fumed. She was very angry and said, “It is incredible! I am covering for him and he is telling people what he did as if I were the one who did it?! In the presence of all people! To shame me like this?!” The farmhand put all this in his heart and went carrying the food and drink back to the field. As the people sat to eat, they asked him what news he had for them from the village. To this he answered, “The

song that is being sung in the village is quite bizarre. You would not believe me if I told you.” He then kept his mouth shut leaving them to drool with curiosity. The folks grew curious as to what kind of a song could be so strange that the women folk were singing it at that particular time. As they couldn’t resist the temptation, they begged him to tell them what it was. And he, pretending not to want to tell them, said: “Then if you insist, here it is..... *laloye.....laloye..... lalo.....*it has been said that my master has urinated in his house like a woman.’ This is the song that womenfolk are singing while preparing the food and drinks. I couldn’t believe it.”

Because such a secret was out on public the husband and the wife avoided talking to each other the entire day. Not satisfied that his lies could only affect the man and the wife, the lying farmhand, devised another conspiracy again. So, he hid a knife under his master’s pillow. And he told the man, “Master, you recall your wife had shamed you in front of everyone by falsely accusing you of peeing inside the house, and now I have come to find out that she wants to murder you. She has hidden a knife under your pillow to kill you in your sleep. You need to be careful.” The man had already been harboring ill-feelings about his wife because of what he had heard from the liar and now he thought bitterly, “This daughter of a whore, as if what she did were not enough, and now she wants my life!” He waited anxiously until it was time for bed.

When they had had their dinner and had seen off their friends and relatives to their homes, the man and his wife went to bed. When it was around mid-night, the man searched under his pillow and, just as the liar had warned him, and he found a huge machete. Overtaken by the apparent trustworthiness of the farmhand, he started to think that the latter was unfairly accused of being a liar by his former owner, while he was in fact such a good fellow who just told things as they were and now has saved his master’s life. He even regretted when he remembered all the things that the liar had told him in the past, that which he simply ignored. Thinking that there could be nothing worse that could come than his wife attempting to take his life, he put down the knife and took an axe which he readily found because the farmhand had conveniently put it there. The unsuspecting wife was fast asleep. He struck her with it and she died in her sleep. The man woke his farmhand and his neighbors and told them that he found his wife dead like that. After this it was decided that news should be sent to her family, to which the farmhand eagerly volunteered to deliver the message himself.

He reached at her family’s house and told them the bad news and it was all wail and cry. When they sobered up from their crying, they asked him what had happened to her because the last time they saw her she was quite alright. Pretending to be on the verge of breaking to tears and sobbing, he told them that this was only the beginning. He told them that her husband was actually refusing to show her body to anyone and that he had threatened he wouldn’t show it even to her own parents.

Upon hearing this, a new level of anger was added to their sorrow. So, they suspected that something sinister must have happened to their daughter. They

carried their weapons and came to their daughter's house. The farmhand said to them that he should be gone ahead of them and reach his master's house before they arrived. When he found the man, he told him that his in-laws seem quite suspicious, they were armed to the teeth, and that they were coming with friends and family to attack him. He said to him, "As the saying goes, 'prepare a way for water before its coming', Sir, I advise you to be safe than sorry. So, I caution you to get prepared to defend yourself."

As the family of the dead woman arrived at the house, they cried according to the custom and sat down. Then they asked to see her corpse. When they were snubbed by the husband, they began to say among each other that what the farmhand told them was the truth. They immediately turned to violence, which was followed by a fierce battle in which scores of people from the woman's side and approximately the same number from the man's side were killed, including the man who had murdered his wife.

Seeing all the bloodshed, the lying farmhand regretted what he had done and fled to the wilderness. Then he went to a monastery for safe-haven. After living peacefully for a few days, he begged the monks to let him see the abbot of the monastery. When he met the abbot, he pleaded with him saying that he needed to pray in seclusion as his sins were terrible. The abbot believed his words about his desire to have repentance and confession and allowed him to move in to a separate hut not far from his own. But not long after that, his old habit caught up with him again. So instead of prayers and repentance, he started to devise new diabolic schemes.

One day he woke up early to carry out his malicious plan. So, he dug a horizontal tunnel that resembled a warthog-whole. He made the mouth of the whole narrow so it would be easy to close with just any small cover. After he finished all this, he went to the abbot's hut and requested of him, saying, "My sins are too grave that I cannot be cleansed with just repentance and confession. Please set my hut on fire while I am inside it. That is my only hope of salvation." The abbot begged him to come to his senses and cast away the devilish thought. But the liar had already agreed with another monk, and hiding in his whole, he got his hut to be burnt and turned in to ashes, though, instead of being charred in the fire, he came out with only some black ashes on his clothes after a while. His head appeared first, then his body and then he came out completely unscathed by the fire. The monks thought they had just witnessed a miracle. They began to think that he was in fact a saint. Then he went to the abbot and said to him, "If you had done what I have just done, you would grow a wing and fly like an angel. Your good deeds would shine for everyone to see." He began to tempt him with his serpent tongue. The abbot thought if that man with all his sins could do it, why not him, who had but spent all his life here in the monastery in prayers and supplication. Then he began to contemplate that it may not be such a bad idea to get his hut set on fire with him inside it in front of everyone in the monastery.

The liar was all too happy to immediately set the house on fire. The hut burned fast because it was made of hay. And the naïve abbot was charred to death horribly,

cursing the liar saying: “Oh, you evil, oh you deceiver, oh you serpent, you deceived me.” The lying farmhand wanted to laugh but couldn’t because his conscience was troubled with the ugly scene. After being defeated by his own conscience day in and day out for a long time, he went to a tree, fastened a noose round his neck and hanged himself to death. But the damage was already done. That’s the story behind the Tigrigna proverb: “A guileful liar deceives a saint”.

Thematic Analysis

The title of this folktale, “*A Guileful Liar Deceives a Saint*” is a well-known proverb in the Tigrigna oral tradition. People would normally bring it up if there is a context calling for its use. In that case, it goes without saying that the listener of that proverb or saying would understand it without too much trouble. However, an inquisitive listener would, from time to time, appear to ask elderly people, or the elderly people themselves would want to share the story behind the proverb. Then the person who told the proverb narrates the background story and how it has come to be used henceforth.

In this tale, anyone would understand that the title which is self-explanatory. But they would wonder whether the notion that good deeds and truth always prevailed over lies and evil deeds. Then having that as a background, they would ask, how a liar, who is evil could deceive a saint, who is good. It is the moral of the story that, even a saint in a monastery should be on their guards at all times.

The message of the proverb is general if not vague. However, the message of the tale is detailed and multi-faceted. This is because the proverb is handicapped due to its shortage of words by its very nature. It is confined to only one phrase, clause or a sentence, in most cases. That is why it helps if the proverb is very poetic and has a well-crafted choice of words that can hit the targeted meaning and message it set out to achieve. In the case of the title and the proverb of this particular story, the message seems to be to show the magnanimity of the effect of lies, to show how powerful a lie can be, to show how far a liar can go, to show how devastating its consequences are, and to show that lies are not to be taken lightly.

The tale has various messages spanning from the simple abhorrence of lies to the highest level of awareness that liars should be checked and watched before they could cause irreparable damages in society. Its storyline is constructed in such a way as a voyage that starts when two people are moving on the way to the market. Then in it continues its progression of voyage after voyage, both in the physical sense and also in the escalation of the behavior of the liar and the outcomes of his vice. The multiple issues raised in the narrative then convey the messages of the tale. Therefore, it is important to see that while the tale has an underlining theme that lies are deplorable, it nonetheless presents us with a variety of instances and issues which could be taken as additional themes and messages as well.

The significance of the tale in the oral tradition of the past and the moral that it may carry to contemporary life of the Tigrigna community is paramount. In the past when there was no other formal way of educating the society, this folktale has been helping transmit moral messages , and it wouldn’t have survived if it were not still relevant in the present times in the culture of the Tigrigna community because people still cherish the values and information that it carries within it. However, it becomes absolutely important for the critical reader or listener to evaluate the points raised in the narrative and crosscheck them with the values of today. This would

help the audience not only understand the way of the past but also the tale's relevance in the present. One of the points primarily raised in the tale is the importance of truth.

The importance of truth as a binary opposite to a lie is implied if not directly stressed in the tale. The way that the story treats lies and liars as scums of the earth and abominable right from the very early conversations and the hint that those who underestimate its vile would not escape being punished by it is evident. This is a clear indication of the value of truth in the Tigrigna community from way in the past and how it was given such an elevated importance. The warning that the master of the young farmhand gives to the owner of the mule when they met for the first time and the fact that they were openly discussing it in the presence of the young farmhand as if he didn't matter, demonstrates that liars have a dishonored place in the Tigrigna society. The rebuke to lies is therefore an indirect compliment to truth in this tale, even though truthfulness is not propagated explicitly.

The deplorableness of falsehood is however deliberately emphasized and brought up throughout the story. The warning that the farmhand's master gives to the mule's owner, right before the exchange was made, is seemingly ignored in the first instances by the man who believed in the presumption of innocence and who had an unshakable confidence in himself as well as his wife. However, even he warns his wife not to believe anything that comes out of the mouth of the liar. Telling lies is depicted as a cause of fights between close relatives, friends, couples, and the wider community to the extent that it could create a disaster and misery. It is also depicted as a cause of disbelief and loss of faith in the end resulting in the destruction of not only the people deceived by the lies but also ending the life of the liar himself.

Critical thinking is another thematic issue raised in this tale. By learning from the lessons in the story, readers or listeners could understand that nothing in this world is to be taken at face value. The length that the liar could go in order to deceive the characters in this narrative is a very important signal that the creators of the story and those who employ it to transmit moral lessons to members of the Tigrigna community have a high regard for critical thinking as one of their messages. Even the ever-trusting second master of the farmhand has at the beginning warned his wife to think critically and not believe whatever the liar said, though he ends up believing him to his own detriment.

The powerfulness of lies or rather their seriousness to undo a marriage, confuse a community, arouse violence and deceive a saint in the story demonstrates that lies are not to be underestimated. Even though audience to this narrative are implicitly advised to be truthful at all times and watch that they value truthfulness and transparency, they are warned to watch lies more closely and more carefully and not let off their guard because its consequences are devastating. None of the characters in the story realize that they were acting upon a false information when they were listening and falling into the liar's traps. For them, whatever they were being fed from him was the truth.

The need for trust is one of the issues portrayed in this story. The farmhand's second master and his wife loved each other, respected each other, and they had no problems in their marriage until the man brought the liar to their house. If they had trusted each other no matter what, they could have survived the tricks that the liar was playing on them and eventually on their lives. There is no question that schemes of the liar were very intricate and complex and were backed up with half-truths; however, they should have trusted each other no matter what. But, because they trusted each other with limitations, they fell victims to his ploy.

The need for communication is another thematic issue raised in the story. Even when there is confusion and when misleading lies were presented under the guise of truth, people, especially husband and wife, as evident in the tale, should be in constant communication. But the husband and wife in the story let their guard down and stopped communicating with each other and let the liar put a wedge between them, which he was able to exploit to carry out his vile crimes. Bearing all one's feelings in one's hearts may be quite a virtue sometimes, but the characters in this story left it quite late to fester in each other's hearts and the result was the devastation and escalation of the vices which eventually led to their demise.

Another thematic issue raised in the tale is the need for being wary of entitlement. Nothing is obvious in life. The monk or the saint took his faith in God for granted and thought that he had attained perfection and felt entitled to salvation and sainthood because he had spent a long period of his life dedicating to God. But to the detriment of all of them, the deceiver was always at work.

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