



## GENDERED DEMOCRACY OF THE OPPRESSED FEMINEITY: A REFLECTION OF THE AFRICAN REVERIE OF BELEAGUERED WOMANHOOD

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### Abstract

*It is an established fact that folklore originates in the psyche of the masses. Therefore, its thematic infusion into the plays may be seen as a conceptualization of these peoples' voices, their ideas, their anxieties, their wants and their social predicament. The long-suppressed desire of freedom and gender equality in the reverie of womenfolk does sometimes reflect in the dramatic lore of this kind. The present paper attempts to bring to light this urge of the womenfolk which is dramatized in an African one-act play – A Village Dream by Mesgun Zerai. In the cultural context of the globe, this East-African folktale is quite significant since the dramatist here examines the reality of the post-modern women's life in their traditional patriarchal garb of female subjugation that represents Africa. The long-debated issue of this gender inequality and repressed femineity undergoes a critical scanner of the playwright from the East-African country of Eritrea. The practical solution of the male subjugation the dramatist offers here through this play seems quite relevant even to the post-modern democratic societies of the globe today. The present paper explores this solution that is visualized by the internationally acclaimed Eritrean playwright, Mesgun Zarai, through his folkloric play – A Village Dream.*

**Key words:** *African folktale, Eritrean Play, Gender inequality, Repressed Femineity, A Village Dream, Women's voice of liberation.*



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### Introductory Statement:

- The women have a long-suppressed desire of freedom and gender equality which sometimes reflect in folklore.
- The present paper attempts to shed some light on this urge of the women. It is found in a folktale from the East African country of Eritrea which discusses the age-old problem of gender inequality in an entertaining and unique way.
- This folktale has been dramatized in Mesgun Zerai's internationally acclaimed one-act play – *A Village Dream*.
- The play presents a unique situation of a group of housewives where they rebel against their husbands to teach them a lesson
  - *for their patriarchal suppression since ancient times*
  - *to demand fair treatment in family matters and*



– to seek equality in the distribution of labour.

#### Scope of the Study:

- Contemporary folklorists have begun to ask what can be learned from women's experience-whether that experience includes being a homemaker, rodeo cowgirl, or well-known rap artist. (Cheryl Keys. 1993. "We're More than a Novelty, Boys": Strategies of Female Rappers in the Rap Music Tradition. In *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner, pp. 203-20. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.)
- Feminist folklorists have looked to women's experience and their expressions of this experience in all its various forms to examine the reality of women's lives in various cultures and contexts. (Nicole Kousaleos. *Feminist Theory and Folklore. Folklore Forum 30: 112 (1999).*)

#### Significance of the Study:

- In the global cultural context, the East African folktale dramatized by Mesgun Zerai is quite significant since the dramatist here examines the reality of the post-modern women's life in the patriarchal society.
- The long-debated issue of gender inequality finds a practical solution in this dramatic folktale. The dramatist is from a tiny African country of Eritrea. The solution he offers through this folkloric play seems quite relevant to the traditionally oppressed women of not only of Africa but of the whole patriarchal world.

#### Socio-Cultural Significance of the Play:

*A Village Dream* by Mesgun Zerai is a short play of six highly entertaining scenes first performed by the Workshop Theatre of University of Leeds in February 2001 and later included in the book entitled "Three Eritrean Plays". In this play, the dramatist brings to light the unfairness of the social system where the women are treated unfairly by the men in terms of the distribution of the routine household labour. He also questions the efficacy of the traditional duties assigned to the women by this patriarchal system since time immemorial and brings forward the socio-cultural scenario where the femininity is repressed by means of round the clock drudgery without rest and pleasures of life that their male counterparts consider as menfolk's exclusive domain. The dramatist seeks some solution to this problem of the beleaguered women's reverie of liberation through a folktale and weaves a simple solution through the magic of words on the stage. The present paper explores this solution that is visualized by the internationally acclaimed Eritrean playwright, Mesgun Zarai in this one act play.

#### Thematic Exposition:

The plot of the play, *A Village Dream*, is centred on a question raised by the female protagonist. Her name in the play is Dehabe. Physically exhausted due to the heavy household-drudgery and in an agitated state of mind, she questions her father in the very beginning of the play: "Why are we women suffering too much? We fetch water, we cook, we collect firewood ... we do everything without any help from our husbands. What is our sin father?" (Zerai, 2006, 28). This anguished cry of a woman from Africa becomes a metaphor of female subjugation from all over the world, including India. In the play, it explicitly throws light on the Eritrean socio-cultural scenario where the women mandatorily start work before their men even wake, and when the men do rise, they take their ease (Plastow 16). For generations, the women's service to the family, in general, and slavery to their husbands, in particular, has always been taken for granted. In most parts of Africa and some of the countries from Asia, including India, this suppression and oppression of women is an institutionalized behaviour since ages (16). The dramatist intensifies the situation even more through the words of a male chauvinist character named, Ijugu, when in the course of the play, Ijugu lends out his male



arrogance in these words: “*You know my wife can’t even piss without asking my permission.*” (Zerai, 31).

This is an extraordinary unfairness of a system that divides labour so unevenly along gender lines (Zerai, 16) in the patriarchal African society of Eritrea. In the play, Dehabe’s father recalls and narrates a folktale entitled ‘*The Women’s Sin*’ to ease out her agony and to pacify her anger. This story within a story in the play attempts to evaluate and justify the age-old gender inequality of Eritrea and dramatizes a dream narrative further of the women’s rebellion against the men’s bullying attitude. This tale of the women’s sin then becomes a metaphoric dream reverie of Dehabe herself in which she leads a rebellion of fellow housewives of the village against their husbands.

Under the leadership of Dehabe, the women of the village collectively decide to teach their menfolk a lesson so that the women’s place in their household be respected and be valued by them. They, therefore, secretly and suddenly without any warning, abandon their husbands, their families and hide in a nearby mountain for six months. They think that under the circumstances it is the best way to subjugate their male counterparts to ease out the women’s familial esteem. In the play, Dehabe’s father considers this rebellion of the folktale as a ‘sin’ for abandoning the familial duties assigned to them by the patriarchal society. And, according to him, that was the reason behind the present-day suffering of his daughter and the womenfolk in general.

Further, in the dream narrative, the dramatist presents the women in exile as relaxed, chirpy and merry. They are away from the routine hard-labour which they used to do to please their husbands, their kids, and their in-laws. They now feel liberated from the usual male dominance. Due to their long absence, the menfolk back home, however, are in a state of utter discomfort. They grumble constantly for their discomfort and curse their wives for their absence. They search their wives everywhere but to no avail. They realize that all their wives are playing some mischief. The responsibility of running the household activities and managing the family affairs every day, now has fallen upon their shoulders. They have to carry all the burden of the routine household drudgery such as dusting, cleaning, washing, cooking and taking care of kids and pets since none is there to replace the hardworking wives. Previously, all those tasks were bestowed upon their women by the decree of patriarchy and they used to carry them out with perfection, and that too, without any grumbles.

Literally speaking, these women are now emancipated – free from male chauvinism, free from familial obligations that were thrust upon them by the patriarchy and, therefore, feel free of all the socio-moral pressures. It’s now a women’s world where no man existed to bother them. However, from deep within their hearts, very soon they find something missing amidst their living. Slowly but gradually, yearning for love and lust creeps into their psyche. They now miss the presence of their husbands and kids. They deserted their men for their ill- treatment not to seek revenge, but simply to be treated by them fairly. They actually sought ‘*gender-equality*’ as Jane Plastow comments about their abandoning the families (Plastow, 2006, 17) in the foreword to the book entitled “*Three Eritrean Plays*”. That was the real motive behind their rebellion. Love and lust between the sexes mean eventually men and women cannot do without one another (Plastow, 17).

Abita, one of the young but emancipated women of the group, realizes this need early. Despite being united with the group for a common cause, she finds the absence of her husband at night intolerable. One night, she sneaks down the mountain in search of her husband lover without the knowledge of her mates and secretly discloses their whereabouts by sowing a path of grain on the way so that the men can follow that path and find their secret camp in the mountains (Plastow, 17).



The hushed conversation between Abita and her husband, Roguie, succinctly represents this need of man and woman for each other:

ROGUE: *I have missed you. It's a good thing that you came back.*

ABITA: *I snuck away to see you, risking my life. My sisters will not forgive my weakness but I can't do without you. I don't want to leave you, but I must return before morning.*  
(Zerai, 32).

The dream sequence of the women later validates this natural need of men and women for each other and point out to the possibility of reconciliation between the two sexes (Plastow, 17). Eventually, directed by the path of grains by Abita's, the suffering men trace the hidden camp of the women and tender apology for their harsh treatment towards them. The protagonist, Dehabe, also realizes that their revolt of abandoning everything to seek emancipation is not a complete solution to address the grievances. Each other's need for natural existence, therefore, leads them all to get united once again 'in order to achieve a final solution by sharing the bad and the good together' (Plastow, 17).

#### Conclusion:

Thus, Mesgun Zerai brings forward the long-suppressed desire of freedom in the mind of African women in this fun-filled and message-oriented play *-A Village Dream*. Although African, the message delivered by the dramatist is applicable to the entire patriarchy of the world. The oppressed women of Eritrea however, do not seek revenge here, they only look for equality. We can, therefore, say that through this play the playwright has proposed a 'gendered democracy' (Jane Plastow, 18) founded on the base of mutual love and respect by both the sexes for each other for the peace, harmony and happiness of the families around the world.

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