

## "FOLK PSYCHE OF FEMININE EMANCIPATION IN ERITREA: A VILLAGE DREAM"

### Article Particulars

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### Abstract

*Folklore primarily is said to be a narrative of the masses and drama is an ancient art of common people. Since folklore originates in the psyche of the common people, its thematic infusion into the play by dramatists 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 mind of womenfolk does sometimes reflect in the dramatic lore of this kind. The present paper attempts to shed some light on this urge of the women in a folktale from the East African country of Eritrea which is dramatized in Mesgun Zerai's internationally acclaimed one-act play – A Village Dream.*

**Keywords:** *African folktale, Female psychology, Folktale, Gendered democracy, Eritrean Play*

Folklore primarily is said to be a narrative of the masses and drama is an ancient art of common people. Since folklore originates in the psyche of the common people, its thematic infusion in the play by dramatists 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 mind of womenfolk does sometimes reflect in the dramatic lore of this kind. The present paper attempts to shed some light on this urge of the women in a folktale from the East African country of Eritrea which is dramatized in Mesgun Zerai's internationally acclaimed one-act play – A Village Dream.

It is a short play of six highly entertaining scenes first performed by the Workshop Theatre of University of Leeds in February 2001. It presents a folkloric account of a rebellion of women against their husbands to teach them a lesson for their patriarchal suppression since ancient times.

The plot of the play 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.*" (31).

This is an extraordinary unfairness of a system that divides labour so unevenly along gender lines (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 narrative 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. 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 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 (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 (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 (17).

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

ROGUIE : *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' (17).

Thus, the dramatist brings forward a long-suppressed desire of freedom in the mind of African women in this fun-filled and message-oriented one-act play -*A Village Dream*- that is applicable to the patriarchy of the world. The oppressed women of Mesgun Zerai, however, do not seek revenge here, they only look for equality. We can, therefore, say that through this folkloric play the playwright has proposed a 'gendered democracy' (18) founded on the base of mutual love and respect by both the sexes for each other. And that is the message we can get out of this folklore from the land of Africa.

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