

A Feminist Reading of Contemporary Ethiopian Novel in English: Gebeyehu Ayele's *Escape* (2011) in Focus

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze the representation of women in contemporary Ethiopian novels written in English focusing on Gebeyehu Ayele's novel 'Escape' (2011). This research is qualitative which uses a method of textual analysis. The novel has been selected because it entertains a subject that lends itself to a feminist analysis. The analysis was made based on a socialist feminist approach to literature. The analysis of the study shows that the novel depicts women in two ways. On the one hand, women characters such as Mulu's mother are portrayed as submitting themselves to patriarchal subjugation because of their economic dependency on their husbands and considering themselves as beings weaker than men because they were socialized to believe that was the wish of God. On the other hand, the major character of the novel named Mulu is portrayed as a strong woman devoted to changing the patriarchal culture of the society that denies women rights and freedom because she had access to education unlike her mother. Mulu, both ideally and practically, opposes the patriarchal custom of the society. Moreover, young male characters such as Dres and Dagne also support the freedom of women.

Keywords: Feminism, Ethiopian Novel, Women, Patriarchy, Resistance

Introduction

Women in Ethiopia have been regarded as subordinate and had been oppressed for centuries. Their activities had been limited to household routine tasks. They did not have access to education, participate in political and economic affairs, and make decisions on important issues (Meron, 2021; Nahom, 2012). However, nowadays, the issue of women and gender equality has been given due attention in the country. Currently, women's activism has been growing, and there have been attempts to open access to women in every aspect of life (Meron, 2021). In the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995), women are granted equality under Article 35. This article ensures

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the rights of women as equal to men in every aspect such as equality in marriage, the right to equal employment, and the right to maternity leave with pay, the right to acquire, administer, control, use and transfer of land and inheritance and the right to access family planning and education (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). Hence, many women in the country have been participating in social, economic, political, and other activities that had been reserved for men only although there have still been problems in benefiting women, particularly in rural areas. Even though efforts have been made to bring social change in rural areas by expanding education, opening health care centers and sending health extension workers to most rural areas of the country are still problems due to deep-rooted backward traditions and lack of proper implementation of policies that have been designed to empower women (Meron, 2021).

In order to alleviate women's problems, women's activism and gender equality movements have been taking place in various forms. Literature is one of these through which women's voices have been reverberated. Literature can be viewed as the reflection of human culture, living style, ideologies, history, political and societal views and so on (Sharma, 2012). Varied aspects of human life have been portrayed in various genres of literature. Novel is one of the well-known genres of written literature which plays its role in mirroring society and societal values. In novels, women as part of social beings are represented as characters to play a certain role (Mesfin, 2020; Teshome, 2013). As literature in general and novels in particular are cultural productions, women characters can be represented to play womanly roles given to them in patriarchal culture. However, literature in general and novel in particular have the potential to recreate and redefine the role of women (Mesfin, 2020).

Researchers such as Nahom (2012) in Amharic novels, Gebreyesus (2008) in Tigrigna novels and Teshome (2013) in Oromo novels have investigated the representation of Ethiopian women. These researchers analyzed the novels based on feminist theoretical assumptions. According to Tyson (2006), feminism is a movement that opposes the political, economic, and cultural relegation of women to positions of inferiority, and hence promotes women's educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political and social power.

Ethiopian women have been suffering from patriarchal subjugation (Meron, 2021). To end this subjugation and empower women, both Ethiopian women and feminist men novelists have been writing extensively on gender issues (Nahom, 2012). The present researcher

strongly believes that Ethiopian writers should fight against women suppression through their literary works. As I have stated above, in Ethiopia, literary research has been conducted using feminist literary criticism, particularly on Amharic, Tigrigna and Afan Oromo novels. Although Ethiopia has a very long tradition of literature in Amharic language, Ethiopian literature in English in general and novel in particular, is in its infancy (Sharma, 2012). Thus, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no study conducted in contemporary Ethiopian novels in English particularly concerning representation of female characters. Hence, this research investigates the representation of women in selected contemporary Ethiopian novels written in English. Thus, this study aims at studying the representation of female characters in a selected contemporary Ethiopian novel written in English.

Methodology

This research is qualitative that employs a method of textual analysis. The source of the study was both primary texts or the selected novel and secondary data that were gathered from other related literature. The novel was selected through purposive sampling for it exhibits issues pertinent to feminist analysis, and the author of the novel is an experienced author. The author of this novel is Gebeyehu Ayele, which was published in 2011, and the title of the novel is *Escape*. Through critical reading of the novel, sample relevant extracts were selected and categorized into themes. Finally, the analysis is made using the social feminist approach to literature.

Socialist feminism emphasizes both the public and private life of a woman and contends that emancipation can only come about by addressing the economic and cultural factors that contribute to women's oppression. Marxist feminism's criticism of capitalism's involvement in women's exploitation and radical feminism's notion of the influence of gender and patriarchy are both the central points of socialist feminism (Armstrong, 2020). Armstrong (2020) asserts that socialist feminism focuses on power dynamics, particularly the confluence of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, as well as the creation of a politicized personal life. She contends that a key tenet of socialist feminism is the multiplicity of oppression. It is believed that the social class system and gender inequality are inextricably linked. Just as the wealthy oppress the poor, so do men, and this is not something that can be simply attributed to specific men who oppress specific women. Because of culture or social interactions that establish our being as gendered individuals, men oppress all women collectively (Armstrong, 2020; Madsen, 2000).

Results and discussion

The analysis of the novel was made under three themes: dominating women, women and religion and resistance to patriarchy. These themes were selected because they are key ideas of socialist feminism. Under each theme, the selected extracts from the novel were analyzed and attempts have been made to relate the analysis with the existing literature wherever necessary.

Dominating women

One of the main concerns of socialist feminism is that patriarchy made women economically dependent on men or on their husbands. This is due to the fact that husbands are the main economic sources and heads of the family. Such gender-based oppression is considered as a dimension of class power by socialist feminists. Husbands take this power as a tool and oppress their wives as wealthy people oppress the poor in capitalism (Armstrong, 2020; Graf, 2012). This assumption is revealed in the novel under investigation.

I don't want you to take my husband to court. How can couples live together after they take their cases to the court? It is not wise and our tradition does not allow this ... If my husband divorces me because of disagreement, where can I go with all these children? What can I feed them? All our means of livelihood are under his control ... I stop taking pills (Gebeyehu, 2011, pp. 57-58).

Women do not want to fight against their oppression because they are economically dependent on their husbands. Instead, they want to stay submitting their right and needs to the wills of their husbands. Although the woman in the extract didn't want to give birth, she preferred doing so just to please her husband because she is economically dependent on him. This is why socialist feminists contend that women should be economically independent in order to emancipate themselves from patriarchal oppressions that give power to men to suppress women as capitalism allows the haves to exploit the energy of the poor or lower class (Madsen, 2000).

Another way of women's subordination seen in the novel is related to reproduction. Armstrong (2020) states that socialist feminists believe that reproduction prevents women from production. Therefore, reproductive

right should be one of the main concerns in fighting against women's oppression.

The two girls were in their small office with a woman. The woman carried a child on her back. 'My husband beats me for taking birth control pills' said the woman crying. 'Didn't he agree during our consultation with him to let you take the pills?' asked the tall girl. He did. But he later changed his mind as he wanted more children ... 'How many children do you have?' asked Mulu. 'Five. The first is six years old and the last one is only eight months. As you know we don't have enough food to even feed the five children. The chores in the house and the field work are also killing me....' Do you want us to discuss the issue with your husband?' asked the short Extension Worker. "No! He will kill me," said the woman loudly (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 56).

In the above extract, one can understand that this novel reveals how much women's reproductive right is exploited by their husbands. This woman's reproductive right is denied by her husband, and she is forced to stop taking pills, and hence to give birth to another child just to fulfill the need of her husband though she knew that the family did not afford even to feed the already born five children. The extract also shows that exploiting this woman is not only restricted to giving birth and taking care of the children, but also she is culturally given the duty of handling household chores and field work. Because the husband is powerful over her, she did not want to argue with him and even she did not want the health extension workers' involvement in solving her problem, rather she accepted her husband's order. This is due to the fact that the patriarchal ideology forced her to live only submitting herself to the will of her husband.

In this connection, Goldman (1969) says that women are restricted and made socially unequal to men, by unpaid housework and mothering. Similarly, Federici (2004) relating patriarchy to capitalism, argued that the emerging capitalist class needed to control working class reproduction, to eliminate working class women's control over biological reproduction, and to perpetuate their unpaid reproductive work in the home by restricting abortions and other birth controlling methods. In solving this problem, according to Cliff (1984), socialist feminists argue that women's liberation requires feminists to join the working class struggle against capitalism. Cliff further stated that because of the problem of unpaid housework, a private task allocated to women in the sexual division of labor of capitalism, complete liberation of women can

only be achieved with the development of socialism and the socialization of housework and childrearing in social services provided by the state.

Women and religion

According to Mesfin (2020), patriarchal ideology desires to give a religious trace to give submissive role to women. As social feminist scholars like Ruthven (1984) argue, male dominancy exists in churches and mosques beginning from their portrayal of Eve and Adam, and women lived comfortably with this inequality. Such kind of religious references would help men like Mulu's father to rule women without opposition. This point is raised in the novel when Mulu's father advises her not to question the importance of her guard:

Is it because women are weak that they are exempted from these responsibilities?" Mulu asked sarcastically. "Yes they are weak. Because the first woman Eve was made from a rib of the first man, unlike Adam whose whole part was created by God. That is why women are weak. The main duty God has given to a woman is to help her husband, bear children and raise them (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 139).

Here, it can be understood that Mulu's father is trying to convince her to be governed with the patriarchal rule without questioning. Besides, using this religious discourse as a reference, he limits women's role in the society to helping husbands, childbearing and taking care of children. Generally, from this extract one can learn that women are viewed in a patriarchal society as objects created to please their husbands. Women also internalize this ideology and believe that they are naturally created as subordinate to men. This issue is also reflected in this novel when Mulu's mother advises her to respect the traditional custom. She says, "It is God who gave men supremacy, my daughter. He made men strong and women weak. He also commanded women to submit to men" (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 135). Mulu's mother internalized the patriarchal ideology and is convinced to live considering herself as inferior to men. This is because she thinks that she is already created by God to be subordinate. Hence, she never wants to change patriarchal domination.

Moreover, she advises her daughter who strives to change the situation that undermines women that she should live submitting herself and her interests to the will of men. This belief of some women can be linked with the socialist feminist's view of religion as repressive ideology that oppresses both women in patriarchal culture and lower working classes in capitalism. As religion hinders the proletariats or working class from

fighting against capitalism that exploits their time and power, it also hinders women from struggling against men domination (Armstrong, 2020; Ruthven, 1984).

Resistance to patriarchy

The story of the novel is set in a rural area, where traditional customs are highly regarded and education and modern thinking are less accessible. However, in the novel, members of the new generation like Mulu who have access to education have shown their stand against patriarchy and traditional gender roles. Hence, they tried to change the existing social reality of women. In relation to this, Alison (1984) states that socialist feminists struggle to bring all-rounded change in the political, economic and social foundations of a contemporary society; particularly education, work, sexuality and parenting should be transformed and embrace women. Mulu's main struggle is to destroy patriarchal ideology, backward culture and practices that hinder women from getting liberated. She thinks that education is the only means to end up women's operation in society. This is why she helps the health extension workers who strive to bring about change in the society despite her father's continuous warning.

Besides, Mulu questions the tradition of male dominance. Mulu argues with her mother about the custom of respecting and honoring men. Mulu argued, "Why should a woman respect a custom that doesn't respect her right? ... This thing you call custom does not see women as equal to men" (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 135). Mulu wants to end the oppression of women by deviating from the patriarchal structure. Unlike her mother, she confronts the traditional custom that has put women under men. Moreover, Mulu's attitude towards patriarchy is revealed when she argued with her father:

Father, just give me your blessing. This is one of the greatest things I should do in my life. I want to see women young and old emancipated from backward oppressive tradition. I want to see poverty wiped out from the land (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 37).

Mulu wants to bring about change in the life of women regardless of age. Although her father is highly proud of the traditional custom, she tells him without fear that his tradition is backward and oppressive. Hence, she has vision to see the changed position of women in the society. Moreover, through education, she hopes to eradicate poverty and see the whole society freed from all kinds of problems and oppression. Mulu's deviation from the traditional oppressive patriarchal system is not only

ideal but also practical. She tried to deny the system practically even in the presence of her father.

Mulu's father: "How dare you kiss a young man in the open? I would rather die than witness such act."

Mulu : "I didn't kiss him, dad!"

Mulu's father: "He kissed you, what difference does that make?"

Mulu: "He hugged me to express his happiness for me?" (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 101).

The above extract is taken from the conversation between Mulu and her father after they came back home from a health extension program meeting. In the meeting, Mulu was praised by the health extension workers for she helped the implementation of the program. After the meeting was over, Dagne hugs Mulu to express his happiness in relation to the recognition given to Mulu in the presence of her father. As it can be seen from the extract, in the traditional culture in which Mulu grew, young girls and boys are forbidden to kiss each other openly. However, Mulu and Dagne break this traditional rule as Dagne kisses Mulu without fear. Besides, Mulu considers this act as normal and fearfully argued with her father. Moreover, Mulu has been comfortable with Dagne's hug because she does not tell Dagne not to do so. As a result, it is possible to say that the new generation like Mulu started to oppose the traditional oppressive culture not only ideally but also practically.

Another evidence for Mulu's deviation is seen when a priest comes to her home. It has been customary for the society to respect priests and to be blessed by a priest by kissing the cross with respect whenever one meets a priest. However, Mulu seems showing disinterest to be blessed by the priest's cross.

Mulu's father replied kissing the cross and bowing to the priest. Mulu stayed where she stood. It is the priest who brought the cross to her to kiss it. ...Finally, the priest started sprinkling the water on the family members. However, when he splashed the water on the face of Mulu, she shouted, "Oh God! Stop it Father!" (Gebeyehu, 2011, pp. 102-103).

Mulu wants to resist this religious practice. It is obligatory for every follower of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity to kneel and kiss the cross of the priest passionately. However, Mulu's decision to stay where she stands instead of approaching the priest shows her lack of interest in the religion. It is also possible to say that she kisses the cross only to please her father and the priest. In addition, she was not willing to be baptized. If she was interested, she would not need to stop him splashing water on her. Therefore, Mulu exhibits the socialist feminism's claim that since religious practices are suppressive to women as they reinforce patriarchal ideology, they need to be challenged and distracted. In other words, since Mulu thinks that the religion is against women's freedom, she deconstructs its rule that demands the followers to be submissive to the religious practices. Thus, Mulu challenges not only the religious practices that are obviously against women but also the religion itself so as to stop the causes that suppress women.

Moreover, Mulu has a strong stand against sexual harassment. In patriarchal thinking, women or girls have been raped and harassed. It had been a normal trend for a girl to live as a wife with a man who raped her without opposing. However, these days, rape and sexual harassment have become crimes in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, such practice still exists in rural parts of the country. As evidence, Mulu's exile to Debrebrihan resulted from the conspiracy to rape her by the rich man to whom her father wants to give her. Although the practice exists and less attention is given to it by rural dwellers, Mulu prefers to struggle against it. This is evidenced in the novel when she wants to take Birru to the court. Birru sexually harassed her in the school. Her best friend Dagne and the school director advised her not to take the case to the police because they feared that if the case was sent to the police, Birru would be jailed and hence he and his friends might attack her in revenge. However, she resists their advice and wants to punish him in the court. "Do you want to let him go unpunished because of the fear that he might hurt me? She looked at him with questioning eyes" (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 111). The expression of Mulu in the above extract is taken when she argues with the director of her school about punishing Birru.

The director told her that the school decided to expel Birru from school as a punishment instead of taking the case to the police, for the school management was afraid of the revenge. However, Mulu wants to confront him without fear. As it can be understood from the extract, Mulu's idea of taking Birru to the police resulted from her awareness of the law, and her desire to end gender-based attack against women. It can also be

understood that Mulu wants to let others learn from the punishment of Birru, and thereby attacks that have been made to women will diminish forever. In addition to Mulu, Dres and Dagne, who receive some education, want to end the traditional patriarchal custom that denies women's right:

Women can be free and independent only when they are educated. It is only education that can help our people escape from poverty, backwardness and harmful traditional practices. Stand up for this cause and educate yourself by any means so you can be a good fighter for the cause ... (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 66).

The above excerpt shows that Dres advises Mulu to continue her education. Hence, it is possible to assume that Dres believes in women's freedom. He thinks that education is the best weapon to fight against poverty and backward traditional customs that hinder women from getting freedom. Moreover, Dagne also wants to destroy the patriarchal system and backward traditions in the society. He thinks that women's suffering in the society results from this backward culture. This view is clearly stated in the novel when he tells Mulu that her father warns him not to meet her:

Struck dumb for a while Mulu started weeping. 'Don't cry. This is one aspect of our old culture. We have to endure it, and work hard to break it. Your father was simply defending the culture he has grown in. There are always clashes between the old and the new, said Dagne patting her shoulder (Gebeyehu, 2011, p. 118).

From this quoted statement of Dagne, one can understand the extent to which he has understood the oppression of women. As a result, he wants to change the oppressive culture and then support the struggle of women like Mulu to liberate themselves from patriarchal burdens. One can also learn from the extract that Dagne believes that women's emancipation cannot be brought only by women but men should support their struggle. This is clearly stated in his speech when he uses the pronoun *we* instead of *you*. As Dagne is male, the pronoun 'we' represents both men and women, and thus the involvement of both sexes has vital role in ending the suffering of women. This implies that men and women should be seen as complementary rather than binary opposites. Thereby, men's support to women's struggle against suppression makes women's journey to freedom short.

Conclusion

As it can be seen from the analysis, in the novel the image of women is depicted in two ways. In the first case rural women like Mulu's mother who did not get education are portrayed as submitting themselves to patriarchal subjugation. Because they are economically dependent on their husbands, and they think that they are naturally created as weak, they should obey the wills of their husbands. In this case, in the novel, women are portrayed as weak, powerless, economically dependent and submitting themselves to the domination of men. Here, it can be said that the author of this novel depicted the existing reality of women's suffering from patriarchy in the rural areas of Ethiopia. Such objective portrayal of women's problem can be related to the finding of Lere and Iyabode (2009) in their analysis of three Nigerian novels. These researchers concluded that the three Nigerian novels revealed the realities of Nigerian Igbo environment in their daily lives as patriarchy impacts women's aspirations.

On the other hand, Mulu is the protagonist of the story who is depicted as a strong and resolute girl who wants to end the traditional thinking and practices that have been abusing the rights of women. Such portrayal of Mulu in this novel is in line with Nahom's (2012) findings of the main female characters depicted as independent, determined, strong women in two Amharic novels called 'Nibut' and 'Yederasiwa File'. Mulu consciously questions the ideas of men's domination and women's subjugation, and tries to deviate from the traditional oppressive customs. Hence, it is possible to say that Mulu is a feminist activist. This can be related to Kramarae and Treichler's (1985) view of feminism as a rejection of every differentiation of human being upon the ground of sex and as a struggle to abolish all sex privileges and burdens.

In addition to Mulu, other male characters like Dagne and Dres are in favor of women's freedom. The acts of Dagne and Dres justify that the concern for women's freedom by early male philosophers as stated by Jose (2004) such as James Mill, Charles Fourier, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and John Stuart Mill continues to the present. As Jose pointed out, all of these theorists champion the concept of women's emancipation with the idea of social improvement.

The struggle of Mulu, Dres and Dagne to challenge traditional gender roles implies that although patriarchal oppression of women exists in rural areas and still is being practiced, it is disappearing gradually. This is also seen in Gebreyesus's (2008) analysis of Tigigna novels. Gebreyesus

concluded that the Tigrigna novels showed gradual destruction of patriarchal ideology and hence this is the indication of the improvement of the negative stereotypical attitude towards women. The new generation supports Mulu's resistance, and the struggle to eradicate patriarchy and backwardness can be taken as a result of their access to education.

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