

## Beyond the Male Gaze: A Study of Female Protagonists in Selected Amharic Films

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### Abstract

The main objectives of this article are to show how strong female protagonists and their male counterparts are depicted and to identify the gender power relationship between male and female characters as represented in two selected Amharic feature films. The selected films are taken as texts and textual analysis is applied to them. This paper argues that though most directors and professionals in the film industry are men and tend to portray women as second-class performers, there are some men who represent women as important as men. Having this in mind, films are chosen purposely based on three criteria. The selected films have strong female protagonists and a storyline that deals with gender issues. The films are “Semayawi” (Heavenly) (2020) directed by Bereket Tesahle and “Anlakekim” (We will not Part) (2014) by Solomon Muhie. The films were analyzed using feminist film (male gaze) and poststructuralist (deconstruction) theories as frameworks. The findings of the analysis show that the female protagonists in the two films are a professional journalist and a middle-ranking army officer. Because women in the films are professional, they are not the object of male desire rather they are the subject of the story. They are depicted as goal-oriented, knowledgeable, powerful and successful. On the contrary, the male characters try their best to get what they want but were unable to be successful on their own. They find what they want with the help of female characters. Therefore, the selected Amharic films show a positive change in the portrayal of women beyond the male gaze.

*Keywords:* Gender, cinema, feminist film theory, male gaze, post-structuralism, deconstruction

### Introduction

#### Background of the Study

The influence of film in our lives is undeniable. Cinema shows us how to live our lives, shape our attitudes, mold our behaviors and gain courage

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to take action when necessary. Screenwriters get the material for their writing from their own society. Most societies in the world practice patriarchy and this social system also operates in cinema. Feminists make strong criticisms against cinema on the way gender is represented especially portraying women as the weaker sex and men the opposite. Different from sex, gender is the expectations of a society that should be performed by men (masculinity) and by women (femininity). Sex, however, is biological and fixed; perhaps with the exception that modern medical science has enabled some to undergo surgeries to alter their sex. The cultural expectations that women and men should act or perform are known and socialized by different institutions. Among these institutions, media in general and film in particular can be mentioned. To fulfill cultural expectations, films stereotypically depict gender. The reason for such depictions is that most films are written and directed by men, and men are superior to women (Smith, 1999). According to Haskell (2016), the standard of being women and men in society reflected in films are as follows:

... A man is supposedly most himself when he is driving to achieve, to create, to conquer; he is least himself when reflecting or making love. A woman is supposedly mostly herself in the throes of emotion (the love of man or children), and least herself, that is, least “womanly” in the pursuit of knowledge or success (p. 4).

Moreover, Smith (1999) argues that in film history, most of the writings and makings of films have been done by males. This made films represent men and women stereotypically. Usually, women in films are depicted as hopeless, dependent, sexual beings and passive.

Apart from such depictions, some male directors and screenwriters produce films against it and urge to show the reverse by challenging the existing status quo. Hence, this article is aimed at showing how strong female protagonists are portrayed and what roles they have in the films directed by male directors. It also addresses what roles male major characters are given. In addition, the article also investigates how masculinity and femininity are represented in the selected films by using male gaze and deconstruction theories as theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, in this paper gender power and relationships are investigated through characters' dialogues and performances in the selected Amharic films.

## Statement of the Problem

According to Smith (1999), most films as cultural practices represent women as inferior, second-class performers, and supporters of men. The roles of women in films frequently revolve around their physical beauty to attract or please their men partners' desires. They are not represented as capable human beings who have visions of their own lives. Such portrayal has a damaging effect on societal attitudes toward women in general and on women themselves in particular. It is also devastating to see a woman in films always depicted as one and the same, as weak persons who need male savior from the challenges they face. A recent study also reported that women depictions in Amharic films need to represent men and women in balanced ways (Gebeyehu & Landsaria, 2019). Against this background, it is refreshing to see some films that depict women in an apparent reversal of, if not challenging, the status quo. I thus have looked into selected films that have women protagonists portrayed as strong and independent.

Moreover, currently, women cinemagoers in the Ethiopian film industry make up over half of the viewers. Thomas explains this fact as, "Roughly 60% of these cinemagoers are women and this gender dynamic is reflected in the films themselves, which often follow the stories of female protagonists (2020, p. 3)." What stories these female protagonists tell is my inspiration to work in this area. If women get an opportunity to be strong protagonists in films, they should get a chance to be heroines and characterized as fully human to exercise their choices. Thomas's findings do not show the female protagonists life and this is taken as a research gap to be filled. Therefore, such depictions that are available in the film industry must be researched and show the new image of women and men to be role models for the viewers (Smith, 1999).

Although cinema productions are increasing in Ethiopia, research in the field is not sufficient (Jedlowski, 2015, p. 182). Especially, how gender is represented in the cinema of Ethiopia has not been researched adequately. One may reasonably wonder why scholarship on Ethiopian cinema remains to be scanty. Thomas (2015) mentions some of the reasons as follows:

The Ethiopian experience is overlooked within the vastly expanding scholarship dedicated to African film and media studies as the Ethiopian context proves less accessible to outsiders for linguistic, cultural, and historic reasons, while European and

American scholars have historically focused on Anglophone and Francophone contexts (p. 18).

Conversely, Aboneh (2016) argues that scholars in the area ignored Ethiopian cinema because either they believed that African cinema is merely a legacy of colonialism or they deliberately omitted it (p. 724). Bitania also adds that unlike films of other African countries, Ethiopian cinema has not been able to get international exposure partly due to its languages, mainly Amharic, Tigrinya, and Afan Oromo, which are less accessible to outsiders (2016, p. 170). Needless to say, due to such reasons, critical literature is scarce on Ethiopian cinema. The knowledge gap in the cinema of the country as well as its absence in the cinema studies of Africa and of the world itself reassures one to research Ethiopian cinema. Consequently, this study attempted to fill the gap by taking one particular theme, i.e. gender, in Amharic films.

Furthermore, Ethiopian cinema is mostly criticized for the representation of gender imbalance. Fastica (2016) found that "Most Ethiopian films reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender depictions of the relationship between men and women which emphasize traditional roles and normalize gender inequality." Therefore, I want to find out strong women's portrayals and their men partners' depictions to revisit the issue from a gender perspective. In addition, Mulvey (1999) states that the functions of women in films are two-fold. The first function is that women are used as "an erotic object for the characters within the screen story" and the other function is women are displayed as "erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.(1999, p.838 )" Apart from such displays, this article shows other ways of women's representation by male directors.

## **Literature Review**

### **Gender and Power**

Power exists everywhere. Kalbfleisch and Cody (1995, p. xiii) describe power in men and women relationships as, "There is power when women and men live together, work together, talk together, or are simply in each other's company." Therefore, we can say that gender is one of the sources of power which traditionally allow men to control women. The system that lets men dominate women is called patriarchy. Hierro and Marquez (1994, p. 175) define gender as "... a system of social hierarchy. It is an inequality of power imposed on the sexes and constitutes the sexualization of power." Power in the gender context means domination,

and it also refers to masculine superiority over the feminine (Hierro & Marquez, 1994).

Gender and power are related. The one who has a male gender has the power to control the other gender, and the one who has a female gender submits to the will of men. Power is more associated with the male gender than the female. Hartsock (1990, p. 157) affirms, "Power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity." Men control political, economic, and military positions to hold power (Hayward, 2000). However, we may find women who have power over men and other women. This is because of the difference in the sources of power. Baldwin (2004, p.94), citing Foucault, explains source of power and its existence as follows: "Power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere." Gender influences the power relationship in society. In explaining how gender affects power relations Koester (2015, p. 2) writes thus,

Gender shapes power relations at all levels of society. In fact, the set of roles, behaviors, and attitudes that societies define as appropriate for men and women ('gender') may well be the most persistent cause, consequence, and mechanism of power relations from the intimate sphere of the household to the highest levels of political decision-making.

Two things are important to consider here. The first is what Foucault says about power that comes from everywhere, and the second is power is owned by one gender because of the system of patriarchy. Therefore, in the following section how gender shapes the power relations in the selected films of Ethiopia is discussed.

### **Review of Related Studies**

Gender is the meaning given to the sexes that are anatomically and physically different that affects and determines a person's psychological level. In general, gender refers to behaviors, patterns of action, participation, power, and a set of beliefs given by a certain society to either one of the sexes.

Although there might be studies before 2006, the researcher could not reach them. Therefore, this study addressed what is available. Tigist (2006) conducted research on two male authored Amharic films. She used the feminist film theories developed by Laura Mulvey, Lacan's mirror stage and Freud's Fetishism. The results of the study showed that in the films women are portrayed stereotypically, as objects of the male gaze and controlled and guided by the male characters. Tigist's research

and this study have employed the feminist film theory as an analysis tool, but this study has been largely guided by the male gaze, not by the mirror stage and fetishism. This study also focuses on films that have a male director and a strong woman character.

Miheret (2007) also wrote an M.A. thesis by using the feminist literary criticism as a theoretical lens to analyze women characters in movies and concluded that when the author of the film was a woman there is a possibility of finding the female gaze. She also revealed that women can be the subject of the story, independent and important in the history of society. Miheret inferred that the two Amharic film writers presented mature and intellectual women. This kind of representation can build a positive image of women. In her recommendation, she suggested that women writers should get involved in the writing business to change the position of women in cinema.

Eskinder (2008) studied one political drama and film from a feminist perspective. In these two genres, women characters that were sexually abused or raped were presented. Therefore, Eskinder (2008) concluded that women should participate in writing creative works to change the way women are represented as victims in movies.

Both the M.A. theses conducted by Mihret and Eskindir analyzed the role of women in the selected movie productions. Their research and this study share the theories like male gaze and feminist film theory, but they only analyzed females from a feminist perspective, but this study critically analyzed both female and male characters using the feminist film theory as well as employing the male gaze and the poststructuralist feminist approach.

Shimeles (2008), on the other hand, reported the results of research on "Portrayal of Gender-Based Violence in Selected Ethiopian Films." Shimeles mentioned violence particularly gender violence as one of the themes presented in Amharic films. Gender violence is based on age, power, and class. The oppressors are aged, powerful and from high class than the oppressed. The oppressed are inferior, powerless, and agents for the pleasure of men. He also indicated that the films he studied depicted a patriarchal male-dominated society. He recommended that such depictions would affect the next generation negatively. To alleviate this kind of problem there should be restrictions on films that display detrimental belief systems.

The study that Shimles conducted is different from the present research because it has a specific theme that is gender violence. Though Shimles's

research and this study deal with gender, they differ on the themes. Shimles endeavored to see specifically gender violence in films, but this research has investigated how gender is portrayed in Ethiopian cinema.

Tesfaye Melese (2013) carried out research that explored the construction of gender in two serial Amharic ETV plays. As a result, he found that the names of the characters are stereotypically role-driven. Gender bias, sexual metaphors, jocks and dreams reflect patriarchal thoughts. Tesfaye concluded that all names of the characters in the two plays were role-driven. The traditional construction of gender bias is reflected in proverbs and sexual metaphors in the texts. Both plays lack a balance of gender and present patriarchal ideology. Hence, he recommended that script writers should be trained to write gender-free plays and show the characters that are free from such patriarchal bonds as an alternative. He also added that there should be lessons included in the curriculum of universities and schools to bring about social change in the construction of gender.

Research reviewed in this section analyzed and criticized mass media like television and film. These media are powerful in instructing, educating and entertaining societies. The studies are similar in their concern that there should be a change in the depiction of women in the media. Moreover, partly women's involvement in writing, producing and directing such literary works will have an impact on changing society's attitudes towards women. This article differs from the aforementioned studies in investigating gender portrayal in selected Amharic feature films directed by men who depict strong female protagonists.

### **Gender in the Ethiopian Context**

Although Ethiopia has had many queens and empresses (Queen Sheba, Empress Zewditu, and Empress Tayitu to mention a few) in its history, the society is male-dominated (Dejene, 2020). Women are seen as subordinate and under the guardianship of their father or family while they are single or of a husband when they are married. Patriarchy as a social system is supported by religion and culture. Haregewain and Emebet stated that "Ethiopia is a patriarchal society that keeps women at a subordinate position, using religion and culture as an excuse (2003, p. 12)."

In addition to the second-class position women hold in society, they work for long hours with less recognition. According to Mulatu (2016), Ethiopian women work longer hours for a small income than men and they are highly uneducated and have a low literacy rate and low level of

nutrition (p. 24). In earlier times and some places nowadays women are obliged to marry early and take responsibility while not enjoying their childhood. In general, women are discriminated against in all spheres of life. However, Article 35(3) of FDRE Constitution (1995) proclaims gender equality in the country and affirmative action for women (to compensate for their former lack of experience) that allows women to be competitive and exercise their democratic and human rights in equal measure as men (JICA, 2006, p. 8).

In general, in Ethiopia men are considered breadwinners and women as family caregivers and thus are dependent on their husbands economically. Nowadays, women who live in urban areas gain better living conditions, education and job opportunities. The section of the society that is disadvantaged in social, economic, and political decisions is women, and although gender concerns both men and women, it is taken as mainly the issue of women. This is due to the inequality between men and women in society (Haregewain and Emebet, 2003). In real life, we see different strong women who participate in social, economic and political activities of the country. Media in general and cinema, in particular, have an impact on people to encourage or challenge the existing practice of patriarchy which promotes male dominance over women. Hence, cinema reflects reality; it should show not only weak but strong women, too.

The practice of cinema as one of the cultural products seems to work towards keeping women in a permanent position. Haskell (2016) thinks that "... the film industry maneuvered to keep women in their place; and yet these very myths and this machinery catapulted women into spheres of power beyond the wildest dreams of most of their sex (p. 3)." The concern of this paper is to explore the gender representation in Amharic feature films specifically in films that present strong women protagonists.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Male Gaze Theory**

"Gaze" is the concept that deals with how the audience views the people presented in the cinema. Moreover, it also studies the characters' gaze towards one another in the film. The term "male gaze" was coined by the well-known British feminist film theoretician Laura Mulvey in 1975 in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey has explained that the role of women in films is often as sexual objects; this is because of the common patriarchal social structure and lack of diversity in directors. She believes that film audiences have to "view" characters from



the perspective of a heterosexual male. In her essay, Mulvey stated that women in the media are presented as sexual objects. Her theory is highly influenced by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis (Mulvey, 1999).

According to the film theorist Mulvey, gaze can be seen in three ways; the first one is how men look at women, the second is how women look at themselves, and the third is how women look at other women in the cinema. Women are oppressed and considered "the other" in a patriarchal society. Almost every society in the world is governed by a patriarchal structure. From the home to a governmental position, every structure of the society is owned by the male as a head. This view is also reflected in the cinema, everything is for the pleasure or sake of men (Mulvey, 1999). Men are first in everything and the second or the "other" is the woman. This kind of positioning is also seen in cinemas. Cinema reflects society's perceptions of gender and also constructs meanings of what to be men and women in society. Therefore, most cinemas are produced for the pleasure of male viewers through male characters. Smelik (2007) explains the marginalized position of women in movies as:

Women, the oppressed ("second") sex, internalize the objectifying gaze of men upon them and do not have the power to own or return the gaze. In the division of the sexes, the man is the subject while the woman remains the other (p.1).

The narrative of the cinema has possessed the desire and fears of patriarchy. In cinema, women are on display and men are the bearers of the look (Mulvey, 1999, p. 837). The male gaze is grounded in patriarchal ideology. In the ideology of patriarchy in all-important institutions, men hold power, and women are deprived of such power (Wilson, 2000, 1494).

Gaze theory functions as a tool to examine objectification in media. In cinema, active and passive aspects of the desire of looking are distributed among the sexes. This theory also helps to understand gender representations in cinema. As to Mulvey, gender power controls cinema. And cinema is produced for men viewers and is deeply intended to provoke patriarchal ideology and discourses (Mulvey, 1999). Since the Ethiopian society is a patriarchal society, this theory posits the examination of how gender is portrayed in Amharic films.

## Post-structural Feminism

Post-structural feminism believes sexual difference or gender is paramount to creating meaning in film (Smilk, 2007). Feminist film theoreticians use post-structuralism to analyze the deep structure of how meaning is constructed. Poststructuralists reject the subject as a fixed entity; deny any notion of the essence at the heart of the self. They argue that we only know ourselves through the medium of language, and individual words themselves gain meaning as part of the system (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004, p. 112). Language is an instrument through which cultural ideologies are transmitted. We perceive what we perceive through language. Tyson (2006) elaborates the role of language by saying, "Because it is through language that a culture's ideologies are passed on, it is not unreasonable to say that it is through language that we come to conceive and perceive our world and ourselves (p. 255)." Tyson (2006) called deconstruction a post-structuralist theory. It is the best-known form of literary criticism. Post-structuralism and deconstruction are terms that can be used interchangeably (Dobie, 2011).

Therefore, deconstructionist reading gives literary texts different structures and meanings. Such practices make literary works have undecided meaning and change fixed binary oppositions. In addition, feminists use this theory to deconstruct the opposition between man and woman which is associated with the history of Western culture (Culler, 1997).

Deconstruction is helpful to analyze the power relation of gender. The theory emphasizes the contingent and discursive nature of all identities. The Feminist Post-structural approach is useful to explore the variety of forms of femininity and masculinity through discourse analysis. It is usually applied to investigate forms of gender representations in cultural texts such as films, literature, magazines, and pictures (Walby, 1990).

Post-structural feminist analysis challenges binary oppositions and shows how power relation is constructed and sustained as dominant in any binary system. In addition, it also exhibits how the other (inferior, dependent, and subordinate beings) in texts is taken as lacking and irrational. Davis and Gannon (2009) explain the concern of post-structural feminist analysis as follows:

Through analysis of texts and talk, it shows how the relation of power is constructed and maintained by granting normality, rationality, and naturalness to the dominant term in any binary,

and in contrast, how the subordinated term is marked as other, as lacking, as not rational (p. 2).

Deconstruction is a basic tool to analyze hierarchical oppositions. It is also a concept that shows that hierarchical relationships are not natural and can be deconstructed to show that they are constructed. Culler (1997) explains:

To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourse that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it and reinscribe it - that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning (p. 126).

Therefore, Derrida's deconstruction theory is applied to the current study to analyze gender and power relationships in the selected two Amharic feature films.

### **Methodology**

This research is qualitative. It employs textual analysis to explore gender representations in the selected Amharic films. The selected films are taken as texts. Extracted contents from the films are examined following the plotline of each film to understand how gender is represented. The relationships between men and women characters, their power relations, and the different positions they hold in the story are considered to understand gender and power representations.

A purposive sampling technique, with text selection criteria of the film content that calls gender perspective, the film directors' gender, and the presence of a strong female protagonist was used. The content of the films was taken as a criterion because some films are more suitable than others to discuss the issue of gender. The directors were chosen because they were considered makers of the films and sometimes directors and scriptwriters are the same (Hayward, 2000). The two films selected for analysis in the study are *Semayawi* (Heavenly) by Bereket Tesahle and *Anlakekim* (*We will not Part*) by Solomon Muhie.

The primary data sources are films produced in the Amharic language. After watching the selected two films repeatedly and carefully, specific scenes were selected from the films to investigate how gender is represented through the narrative and dialogues and of course some visual elements when necessary. Then the selected scenes were transcribed and translated into English. The contents are taken from masculine and feminine characteristics defined by the society

The data generated from the selected films were analyzed through such theories as feminist film and deconstruction theories. The two theories which inquire about gender differences from women's perspective help to present a critical analysis of the unbalanced relationship of power between men and women (Pironaziri & Shiri 2016, p. 67).

Then to show gender differences, dialogues and performances were taken into account and the study was conducted comparatively on how male and masculinity and female and femininity were presented. Gender power is defined as the ability to influence and dominate the narrative through various means.

### **Scope of the Study**

The two films selected for analysis in the study are *Semayawi* (Heavenly) (2020) by Bereket Teshale and *Anlakekim* (2014) (We will not Part) by Solomon Muhie. Dialogues, narratives and performances of the characters were analyzed in this paper. Other cinematographic elements are beyond the scope of this study.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Synopsis of the Films**

##### **Synopsis of *Semayawi***

*Semayawi* is a film directed by Bereket Teshale. In the film, the female character Fikir is a journalist. She works for a private magazine publishing company. She collects information with evidence and publishes it to the public. Fikir meets with Alem in one press release and understands that there is a case that she has to investigate. Then, she starts working with Alem to publish an article that reveals the personality of Professor Abraham, who is competing to be a minister for the Ministry of Education. Following this publication, Alem's life gets worse. He lost his job with false accusations and his daughter is kidnapped. Fikir never stops finding ways to help Alem. In the end, she risks her life and finds out about Professor Abraham's true personality. He abused his daughter and Alem as well. Then, she uses Professor Abraham's daughter to expose his crime to the public and then to find Alem's daughter at the same time. In the end, Fikir attempts to not only save Alem's daughter and the Professor's daughter from sexual abuse but also exposes Professor Abraham's crime.

##### **Synopsis of *Anlakekim***

Engeda and Lieutenant Serkalem meet for the first time in the hospital. Serkalem came to Addis Ababa to take care of her sick mother and Engeda worked in the hospital as the son of the owner of the hospital and who is also a doctor. Serkalem works in the Ethiopian army. She serves her country with pride and dignity. Engeda lives a luxurious life and has many women partners. After he has met Serkalem, he wants to exercise what he does to other women. She rejects him and tells him that he is not a man to deserve her attention. Engeda is proud because he is a rich doctor and has international exposure. He wants to get Serkalem's attention and date her, by criticizing Ethiopia as a country of poverty and the people's way of life. Serkalem tells him that he is bragging and is not the kind of man to date her. He follows her to the end and finds out that she is working in the Ethiopian army and he wants to show her how gentleman he is. Then he joins the army and passes through different challenges and finally respects his country and has Lieutenant Serkalem as the love of his life.

### **Subject versus Object**

Vollmer (2007) argues that the seeing subject is considered to be in a position of dominance over the seen object. In *Semayawi*, the two main characters are Fikir and Alem. Fikir is a very beautiful and attractive young protagonist which is commonly expected from a female character in the cinema world. However, she is wise and never uses any physical force or her beauty to have what she wants rather she uses the wisdom that comes out of her knowledge. As a journalist, she fact-checks information and speaks truth to power by writing articles and questioning anyone without fear. She has arguments with her employer about what she wrote but won in the end. The one who complains about her at first praises her at the end. She is serious. We find her always at work. Her professional competence makes her be the subject in the story. She shows her subjectivity by doing her job in her way. Here is an extract:

Ato Wedema: Why was an article not published about the teacher's immorality?

Fikir: Because what was said about him was completely a lie.

Ato Wedema: What evidence do you have?

Fikir: Look boss, I prove that it is a master plot. I confirm.

Ato Wedema: I do not think there is any evidence other than a photograph unless you are blind.

Fikir: You have to thank the photographer because he saves your organization from making a mistake.

Ato Wedema: Fikir, you take things lightly. I can tolerate many things, but I can never tolerate this. So I want this to get published.

Fikir: (Standing from her chair) I can't Mr. Wedema. I can't sell the truth on purpose.

Ato Wedema: Hmm...You stop calling me my boss and call me by my name, Wedema. Later you will add Endeshaw and call me Wedema Endeshaw? Why should I argue with you? Abebe, Kebede, or others can write, but they may not write well like you. Why am I arguing with you? Leave my office once and for all. Is that not enough for you to do what you wish and call me Wedema? (Bereket 2020, 37:32- 38:53)

As we see from the extract, her boss chooses her over other male writers for the reason that she writes better than them. In this film, we see gender stereotype management. She is evaluated on her performance, not on her gender. She is not only beautiful but works professionally. Here her boss is very angry because she calls him by his name. He just likes to be called her 'boss' which shows he is superior to her only by having a position over her. Instead of convincing her over the matter they are discussing, he is worried about how she addresses him. Though he wants to show his position is higher than hers, practically he can't do anything without her. He knew that the work of Fikir is what makes his magazine to be readable. Contrary to her boss, the dean of the university sees her as a young person who cannot challenge him and discover the truth by denying what he has done to his daughter (Bereket, 2020, 50:24). The film shows Fikir as the central subject of the story, not the object to show or fulfill male desires. She is not the object of the gaze throughout the story but rather the subject by being involved in different activities that change the direction of story into the next level. At the end of the story, we see Fikir's wearing a miniskirt that shows her body which has no use except for the gaze of the audience (Image 4).



Image 1(20:38)



Image 2(1:16:08)



Image 3(1:21:19)



Image 4(1:23:42)



Image 5(19:28)

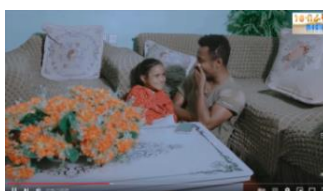


Image 6(27:40)



Image 7(1:15:30)



Image 8(1:39:04)

Alem is a university lecturer who has a beautiful daughter. Even though he is a successful lecturer in his profession, people like Solomon and the school dean, Professor Abraham do not like him because he speaks the truth. He fights for truth and pays a lot of scarifices on the way. He gets fired from his job for the fictional story and lately his enemies kidnap his daughter which makes him suffer more. He goes through difficult times because he knows that Professor Abraham does not qualify to be a minister of education. Alem also stands for the teachers who get fired

because of Abraham's politics. Moreover, Alem is responsible for his daughter; he takes care of her, nurtures her, and gets emotional when she is kidnapped by his enemies. He becomes hopeless and uses his physical power to discover where his daughter could be. In the story, a lot of physical conflicts appear that Alem uses to figure out where his daughter could be. He hurts others physically and offends others as well. However, his activities could bring no change.

In the story, both characters equally lead the narration forward. Both Alem and Fikir are active and the subjects of the story. However, Fikir runs the plot wisely to the next level. She is involved in every scene to uncover the unknown. Although her role is great as the subject of the story, Alem also has an active contribution. Here in this film, the male gaze that depicts a woman as an object to be seen by a man is discouraged. The two genders play a complementary role in moving the story forward.

In *Anlakekim*, though the story is told from the male character's point of view, the female protagonist Serkalem also plays a significant role. Engida is extravagant and abuses men and women with his money till he meets with Serkalem (Image 1). He tries to attract Serkalem's attention by doing what he usually does to women. But Serkalem does not allow him to do whatever he wants. Then the main plot goes on narrating Engida's actions which are so strange to the environment he is living in to win Serkalem's heart.

The main strong female character, Serkalem, is represented as a lieutenant. She defended herself and tells what is right. She even directs the male character to a different world without his expectation (Solomon, 2018, 11:19). She has an active role and controls her life and works well whereas Engida becomes envious of her and joins the military and is unable to perform and finish the training well. He tries to escape from the military camp using different reasons (Solomon, 2018, 1:07:12). But Serkalem and her comrades would not allow him to do so.

In a stereotypical way of depiction, the subject of the story is usually male and the object is female (Mulvey, 1999). However, in the film *Anlakekim*, Serkalem, the main character is active. She is serving in the Ethiopian army and also participates in family duties. When her mother is sick, she comes back home to take care of her. Engida follows her to win her heart but she does not surrender. Serkalem as a lieutenant trains male and female cadets in the army to be strong enough to defeat the enemy of their country. Being in the army is challenging for both men and women.



Especially women are seen as the weaker sex in the society and are not expected to be soldiers. She goes through challenges and becomes a lieutenant. And again she has to face Engida who just comes to the military camp to show how strong he is. He only sees her as a woman simply as the object of his desire but she is the subject of the story who plans and does things as to her will. Though Engida comes to show how masculine he is, he could not bear the challenges in the camp. He harasses her in different ways and gets punished for each of his actions (Solomon, 2018, 44:49; 55:05).



Image 1(2:33)



Image 2(11:55)



Image 3(1:29:14)



Image 4(1:32:42)



Image 5(6:52)



Image 6(30:53)



Image 7(48:39)



Image 8(1:39:04)

Engida struggles to survive in the military camp. He could not eat the food, nor could he share a bedroom with other military cadets. He even refuses to eat but he could not bear the hunger. Both characters fight to show their strength. Though Engida has a wrong stereotypical way of

seeing women, he learns through his stay in the camp that he is not right. He learns his lesson to love his people and country. Furthermore, Serkalem is the main reason for him to explore more about his people and country. She is the reason for his change of character. She is also changed at last. For Serkalem, to be a strong soldier means to be goal-oriented and serious, and do things following the chain of command of the military. Serkalem evaluates the behavior Engida shows and judges that he could not fulfill the expectations. Though the traditional view depicts women as useless, this film shows more values of women by giving them different roles than the usual. Though Engida follows Serkalem as a woman to fulfill his desire, at the end he becomes a changed man for good and starts considering women more than sexual beings.

The two characters share their qualities to be happy in the end, he falls in love with Serkalem and starts loving his country and Serkalem becomes more sociable and learns that she doesn't have to be single to serve her country as a soldier. Engida tells Serkalem that this is what she lacks, though she teaches him to know his people more and to love his country. Again in this film, we see the male gaze at the beginning but are discouraged by the condition in the scene that shifts the male character's focus from seeing women as erotic objects to contributing members of society. The two characters involved in the story equally complement each other.

### **Powerful versus Powerless**

The film *Semayawi* represents a strong female character by assigning the journalist role to Fikir. The source of Fikir's power is the articles she produces in one of the media organizations. As it is said, media is the 4<sup>th</sup> state, and it has the power to convince people to act and know the truth. When the public knows the truth, the law will be applied to make the wrongdoers accountable. Fikir owns this power to reveal the wrongdoings following what is going on. She works diligently that keeps her powerful in the story. She never stops searching for the truth and sets people free who deserve freedom; she exposes professor Abraham's wrong actions and frees his and Alemu's daughter from abuse and disappearance, respectively. Alem fights physically but is powerless, unable to get what he wants, and cries out loudly feeling hopeless.

Fikir has power to change the situation for the better. She takes risks to get solutions. She follows Abraham's day-to-day activities and chooses an appropriate time to free Tewled from the place where he is kept as hostage (Professor Abraham's daughter) and discovers that the father has

been abusing his child. Then, this becomes the key to finding Alem's daughter. Alem gets the chance to regain what he loses. He negotiates with Professor Abraham to exchange their daughters. In the meantime, Fikir reports the case to the police and saves Alem, Tewled, and Mary (Alem's child). How powerful Fikir is just by using her detective skills and exposing the dean's corruption, taking risks and helping Tewled to escape, and Mary too. She has the knowledge to use her power. She knows how to use information and evidence to succeed in her career.

In *Anlakekim*, Serkalem is so powerful that the cadets follow her orders without a question. She serves in the Ethiopian military with the rank of lieutenant. To be a lieutenant in the army requires one to work hard. Serkalem is strong enough to meet all the requirements and be the person who needs to be a lieutenant. She is serious, goal-oriented and works hard to be productive. Since she has a rank in the military, she exercises power over Engida. However, Engida resists her power over him but could not change anything. He always sees her as a woman who should submit to his will. Being a soldier and serving his country is not his aim. Nevertheless, he fails to finish the training and wants to quit. However, she shows him that he is wrong, and women have more in life than satisfying the needs of men. Engida assumes he can do whatever he wants using his money and the people he knows to win Serkalem's heart. She disciplines him by punishing him as his commanding officer. Here is an excerpt as evidence from *Anlakekim*:

Lieutenant Serkalem: You are told to run not to walk fast.

Engida: I am not an athlete okay? I am running as fast as I can. Hey, are you taking revenge on me? Hey, shouldn't the drama be over? Do you know you are a commanding officer for others but not for me?

Lieutenant Serkalem: I don't know! What I know is you come to a place where you do not belong and do not perform your job very well. Now run!

Engida: Please stop, please stop!

Lieutenant Serkalem: Run!

Engida: Please stop running away from me. You can't avoid me. Please stop.

Lieutenant Serkalem: Good! You will start to run again from the first lap.

Engida: What? Yeah, this is revenge. Yeah... let me tell you one thing though people here do not understand me, I can hire a lawyer and punish you if I want to. Okay. That is what my money can do while I am just doing my job and you're struggling.

Lieutenant Serkalem: Run! (in a commanding voice)

Engida: And here you are. It is very easy for me to run. Hey, even like this (He tries to show her in action but falls down the hill. She stops running and looks at him.) (Solomon, 2018, 56:02- 56:53)

For him, she is only a 'woman' that can be taken as powerless. For her, he is not qualified to be called a 'man'. Through conflicts, they just exchange their thoughts and beliefs about each other. He thinks that his money and the people he knows have the power to come to his rescue. However, his money and people are powerless to alleviate the problem he is in. He cannot do whatever he likes to do to Serkalem as he used to do to other women. He is not goal-oriented at first. It is Serkalem who gives him the challenge to know himself and his capacity and become a man of dreams. Therefore, he is convinced by Serkalem and learns from friends to love others unconditionally. Though his childhood experience made him hate women and revenge himself on whoever who has wronged him whenever he gets a chance, he changes his attitude and the way he behaves toward them gradually. Serkalem is powerful in exercising her authority over him. She is also a role model for Engida to know and serve his country better with love and passion. Here, what Serkalem lacks is being sociable, and Engida comments on this behavior lastly and she improves it by accepting his love.

### Conclusion

Women characters that are represented as strong protagonists play influential roles in the story of each film. The two female characters have their roles in the public sphere as journalists and an officer. The positions they hold in the story made them use their professional knowledge to act on the problems they face. The unusual roles female protagonists play in the two films seem to change more of what appears to be a 'patriarchal cinema'. We do not see any female characters working at home. They work outside the home, they are not domestic workers. These women do not live with their parents, and they have free choice of life. Lieutenant Serkalem chooses Engida to be her life partner after he has proven that he can pass different challenges. A woman is like a country, well respected,

and protected. The two female characters are goal-oriented. Fikir is professionally devoted to her work, and Serkalem also loves her career and trains the *dadets* to complete their training. Alem is sociable. He is a responsible single father who takes care of his daughter. Sometimes he becomes so sensitive and emotional. He sometimes uses physical force to get what he wants.

Although the two films are made in male-dominant culture, they represent women as strong, goal-oriented role models who can perform as their careers require. What they lack is being outgoing and emotional, taken as feminine traits. They show strong performances on their job and overcome their weaknesses at the end and become happy. In the two films the male characters are emotional, frustrated and outgoing. They have strong desires and pay sacrifices when necessary. Alem is a single parent and takes care of his daughter. He teaches at the university and fights for the rights of others. The emotions displayed in the male characters show that it is normal for a man to feel like that. It adds some elements to the expected traits of men in different situations. The female characters in this study act differently depending on the situation they are in. Therefore, the situations they are exposed to determine the female characters' positions and influence others who are related to them.

The female characters in the two films exercise their authority fully. They are goal-oriented, well-focused, and successful in their public lives. The films do not present the female characters in their private lives. They do not have someone to care for; they are not emotionally engaged with someone. They are strong and capable of doing the right thing and deciding at the right time. In this regard, the selected Amharic films show a change in the representations of women. The stories of the female character in the films end happily. Male characters are also depicted as emotional. They fight to get what they want but fail in the end. They become desperate when the situation becomes unsolved. They are also depicted as outgoing. Therefore, the selected films do represent women and men in new forms that could be taken as positive change and improvement in the film industry.

Finally, it is recommended that such kinds of films be made more frequently in the future because they have the power to change society for the better. Such films may show to women that they can be confident, productive and valuable members of society. Therefore, other screenwriters, directors and producers should be encouraged to follow in the footsteps of the professionals who made the two films which were the subject of this study.

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