

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT MASCULINE IDEALS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ETHIOPIAN MASCULINITY/IES, LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Tripti Karekatti, Department of English, Shivaji University, Kolhapur. Maharashtra

Abstract:

The overemphasis on white heterosexual males while discussing masculinity/ies has resulted in the marginalization of other forms of masculinity, especially, Asian and African masculinities. The present paper, a modest attempt to assert the plurality and diversity of masculinities and to focus on different voices, focuses on Ethiopian Masculinities and analyses the transformations brought about in Ethiopian Masculinities by socio-political and economic forces. Oral and written Tigrinya and Amharic Literature is analysed in the light of existing anthropological research on Ethiopian culture. The contemporary Ethiopian literature, the paper argues, doesn't reflect the "purposeful cultivation of ferocity" and the "theme of masculinity as capacity to kill" as described by anthropologists like Mazrui (1977) and Gilmore (1990). The paper concludes that the contemporary literature is marked by an ambivalence regarding masculine ideals, an inevitable result of a society going through major changes.

Keywords: *Ethiopian Masculinities, African Masculinities, Military man, Local militia, political violence, ambivalence.*

Masculinity, for a very long period has been defined from the perspective of the white men. As Asante (2011, p. 11) has said, 'For more than five hundred years, the defining characteristics of masculinity have rested in the hands of European males' resulting in the construction of a standard masculinity based on heterosexual white males which disempowered African and Asian males. Creation of this dominant image of masculinity based on the image created by a tiny part of human population has made other masculinities appear 'erratic, off-centre, or aberrations' (Asante, 2011, p. 12). To stop this marginalization of other forms of masculinity and to assert the plurality and diversity of masculinities, study of new and different voices is very much essential. The present paper is a modest step in this direction. It makes use of earlier research on Ethiopian masculinity/ies and tries to take a fresh look at the current versions of masculinity and/or the changes witnessed due to the changing socio-cultural and economic circumstances.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the representation of masculinity in some written and oral Ethiopian literature in relation to its cultural and ideological context. The paper begins with a very brief review of African and Ethiopian Masculinity Studies and then proceeds on to analyse some Ethiopian literary texts in the light of a few famous anthropological studies on Ethiopian culture.

Interest in the study of masculinity is relatively a recent phenomenon. It developed originally as a response to women's movement and feminisms in 1970s. But in the last few years the limitations and oppressive nature of conventional masculinities as well as the disempowering of Asian and African men due to the construction of a standard masculinity based on heterosexual white males has been attracting steady attention.

African Masculinities and Ethiopian Masculinities

The constructions of African Masculinities are fraught with contradictions and fissures and this is being realized very recently. African males 'share' one part of the identities with African women and another part with white/European men. If African-ness is 'shared' between males and females then 'African masculinity' is defined not just by African males. White/European males help in making African men.

Whether we take a stance for or against the notion of African masculinities, we automatically get involved in a dialogical material world that is always structured by and around power.

However, all these complexities are just beginning to attract attention of masculinity studies. Studies of African masculinities have not been that frequent even if Masculinity Studies has been gaining strength over the last few decades in the West. There have been just a few studies of African-Americans and of the effect of colonization on African masculinity and all of these are comparatively very recent ones. Studies of peoples of Africa (other than African-Americans) are even fewer.

Caldwell, *et al's* (1989) study is one of the very first works on African men and has remained influential in studies of African male sexual behaviour and in studies of AIDS. However it has also been highly criticised for making African sexuality appear “permissive, if not promiscuous, and for overlooking values and morality surrounding manhood and sexuality” (Heald 1999).

Another significant work is that of Silberschmidt (2001, 2005). Silberschmidt has pointed out how poverty in Africa has hit both men and women but how both have responded differently to it: with men withdrawing from their traditional responsibilities (as a bread winner of the family, as the head of the household, etc) and women forced to take on new responsibilities, leading to disempowerment of rural as well as urban African men. With men seeing their honour, reputation, and masculinity in general threatened, they are resorting to acts of violence and sexual aggressiveness to bolster self-esteem. (Silberschmidt 2005, 2001)

Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell's *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (2005) explores what it means for an African to be masculine and how male identity is shaped by cultural forces. The editors believe that to tackle important questions related to Africa the many forms of violence (wars, genocides, familial violence and crime) and the AIDS pandemic it is necessary to understand how a combination of a colonial past, patriarchal cultural structures and a variety of religious and knowledge systems creates masculine identities and sexualities. The book bears out how vulnerability and marginalization produce complex forms of male identity.

Apart from these pioneering works, there is a small but growing body of literature on African masculinities emphasizing how African masculinities are not uniform, monolithic and static. African masculinities are shaped by the specificities of political, social, cultural and economic contexts. However, most of these seminal works have almost nothing or very less to say about Ethiopian masculinities. The issue of complexities of Ethiopian Masculinities seems a marginalized and ignored area within the literature on African masculinities. Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell's remarkable book has no chapter on Ethiopian masculinities. It makes just a passing reference to Ethiopia only once in the entire work - 'the symbolic rule of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia' (Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005, p.3).

Ethiopian Masculinities

Much of the relevant information on Ethiopian men, male bodies, concepts of honour, cultural customs and upbringing, has to be derived from anthropological and sociological works. Dr. William Shack's wrote a series of anthropological works (Shack, 1966, 1974 a and b). His work revealed that ninety percent of Ethiopian students showed a preference for the military man as their 'cultural hero' (cited in Levin). A seminal work in the field is Levine's (1966) 'The Concept of Masculinity in Ethiopian Culture' and later *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of Multiethnic Society* (1974). Other few works available are Ali Al Amin Mazrui's (1977) *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa*, and David Brakke's (2001) *Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black Skinned Other and the Monastic Self*. Gerschick (2004) notes the use of elaborate hair designs of Karo men of Ethiopia worn as masculine symbols. Professor Donald Levine's (1974) influential work describes what he calls, the “Cult of Masculinity” which is carefully cultivated amongst the majority of the Ethiopian men. There are also a few studies of Ethiopian proverbs and lyric poetry like the study of Alemayehu Moges' Ancient Ethiopian Proverbs in Amharic, Enrico Cerulli's *The Folk-literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia*. Jeylan Hussein's study of Oromo proverbs and

Amharic Oral lyric poetry in Raya by Mesele (2007). The main aim of these studies is not to analyse the literary and cultural texts from the perspective of Masculinity Studies but nevertheless are helpful as they often reveal the gender biases reflected in these texts.

Direct competition of physical skill and strength is a feature of masculinity and this appears in some or the other form in virtually every culture on earth. It is also common to find many customs and rituals which endeavour to instill these values in young boys across all cultures. The same applies to Ethiopian cultures. About this Gilmore (1990, p.253) writes

The Amhara, an Ethiopian tribe, have a passionate belief in masculinity called *wand-nat*. To show their *wand-nat*, Amhara youth are forced to engage in bloody whipping contests known as *bune*.

In these whipping matches, faces were frequently lacerated. The participants wouldn't show any sign of pain from the whipping. Any sign of pain or weakness gives rise to mockery and taunts of being effeminate. To further demonstrate their masculinity, boys burn their arms with hot embers (Reminick, 1982, cited in Gilmore, 1990). Norman Mailer (1966, p. 201) has said, 'Masculinity is not something given to you, something you are born with, but something you gain... And you gain by winning small battles of honour.' Kimmel (1994, pp 37-38) observed that often males' bodies are "the ultimate testing ground for identity in a world in which collective solutions to the problem of identity seem all but discredited". In Ethiopian culture, men's bodies become 'the ultimate testing ground' for identity. Men make a kinaesthetic use of their bodies making it thus the key mechanism to perform and achieve gender. In addition to courage, physical skill and strength, Ethiopians, particularly, the Amhara tribe is alleged to be seeing masculinity as 'capacity to kill':

The theme of masculinity as capacity to kill continues in the culture of the Amhara and the Empire they ruled. Donald Levine tells about the place of the purposeful cultivation of ferocity in the process of socialization and educating young people. (Mazrui, 1977, p. 72).

Donald Levine also says that purposeful cultivation of ferocity is given an important place in the socializing and educating of young people of Ethiopia. That could be a reason why ninety percent of Ethiopian students considered military man as their cultural hero. Ali Al Amin Mazrui (1977, p. 73) notes:

In some African societies the expansion of economic and political opportunities for young people has resulted in the decline of the prestige of the profession of combat as such. But in Ethiopia the prestige of the military hero continues to exercise considerable influence on the imagination of young people.

After discussing the differences between the Somalians and the Amhara Mazrui (1977, p. 73) says:

But one cultural factor that they do have in common is the mystique of purposeful ruthlessness as a manly virtue where the occasion arises.

Negussay Ayele (2011) in his article 'Legitimacy, culture of political violence and violence of culture in Ethiopia' that focuses on the "paradox of Ethiopia's unprecedented longevity as one of the oldest polities in the world on the one hand and its pervasive and perennial culture of political violence on the other" also uses Levine's arguments to explain this paradox. After discussing the political violence and opportunities of change in Ethiopia from 1769 to 2009, Ayele says that Ethiopia is sadly unique as it has not been able to shed its culture of violence. Further he insists,

More often than not, political violence has become the preoccupation of a "culture of masculinity," which is often proudly acknowledged by its practitioners. ...the culture of masculinity is embedded as a "default" norm of male behavior. (p.226)

To validate his argument, Ayele refers to how Ethiopians swear by invoking the pain of death - "let me die", "let my father die" to prove the sincerity of their claims/promises. They even swore by invoking the name of the Emperor when he was alive - "Let Haile Selassie die". The author says this seemingly unimportant observation actually reveals the fundamental "political culture in which death, killing and

dying have been seared into the Ethiopian subconscious from generation to generation” (Ayele, 2011, p.226).

Contemporary Ethiopian Literature: An Analysis of Amharic and Tigrinya Cultural and Literary Texts

Given so extreme descriptions of Ethiopians' ideals of masculinity, seeing their representations in recent literature can be a very rewarding activity. However, I have come across almost no research on analysis of Ethiopian literature from this perspective. The present paper is a small step in this direction. In absence of English translations of literature in Ethiopian languages, it depends on the translations of some oral literature and of Tigrinya novels available in the work of research scholars like that of Tesfaye Mesele (2007) and Gebreyesus Teklu (2008). The present paper sought to find out what characteristics of masculinity are represented in this literature and how far it supports observations of sociological and anthropological studies quoted above, especially that of Levine.

Literature whether written or oral plays an important role in reinforcing the cultural ideals of masculinity such as competitiveness, dominance, forcefulness, endurance, confrontation, self-reliance, and willingness to take risks. Tigrinya novel of Abeba Tesfagiogis, entitled *Whom Shall I Account for my Agony* reflects the same ideals of conventional manhood:

While Wubitu was known for her modesty, and honesty, as well as for her expertise in house making, Tigil was also a courageous, soldierly, industrious farmer, judicious and dedicated to truth. During havoc, he used to fight courageously; however, during peaceful times he used to spend his time plowing the land and writing traditional poetry ... (Abeba T., 1973/74, p. 33)

The conservative gender-based division of labour is also reflected in the Tigrinya novels. Mehari, a male character in another Tigrinya novel *The Cub of the Lioness* prefers to serve as an Italian conscript, which he hates from the bottom of his heart, than to serve as a chief cook/bed maker/ dishwasher, since to be a soldier is manly in his opinion. (Birhane, A., 1990, p. 41)

The Oromo proverb 'A male person is dead from his birth,' inculcates fearlessness as masculine self-fulfillment. Often proverbs and folk songs try to hammer these ideals from very early childhood like this Amhara Oral Lyric poetry does:

'There are people within us who beautify their *gombiso*
There are people within us who beautify their *afro*
Who follow us when we go for a battle
And who lead us when we come back home'

A man who is afraid of physical combat and death deserves ridicule and taunts in patriarchal society. The Italian soldier Albertony in Birhane Achame's novel trembles at the sight of sword brandished by Mehari and Mehari pities his 'unmanly' fear. If a man who fears death becomes an object of pity, a man who is afraid of his wife, is thoroughly despised. Te'ame another character in Birhane Achame's *The Cub of the Lioness* becomes a topic of gossip and ridicule and people come to 'see' him once the news that his wife beat him spreads around. That a woman has to be kept in control, if necessary with help of violence, is a masculine value which proverbs take proper care to indoctrinate. For example, consider this Oromo proverb: '*The lady, whose husband spoils her, slips from the tanned hide*'.

A right to violence against women is so much taken for granted, that even in the writing of a female novelist like Birhane Achame, similes such as the following are not rare: The Italian government took our scared country Ethiopia, the mother of heroes by force like a bold man who rapes a woman.

R. W. Connell (1995, p. 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as

...the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

Unconscious use of figures of speech as in Birhane's novel reveal how pervasive is the effect of hegemonic masculinity. Through passages of this kind, rape gets naturalized as an action of a brave man.

Obviously, to be defeated by a woman is treated as an insult of the highest order. When Kidan in Birhane Achame's *The Cub of the Lioness* overpowers the bandit Tsigay, this is the conversation which takes place:

'Please Kidan, my sister, do not humiliate me'

'You have been humiliating men for many years... yet you fall into the hands of a woman.'

(Birhane A., 1990, p. 13-14)

If one defines masculinity in terms of a set of attitudes, behaviors or traits, then women displaying these attitudes and traits can be described as masculine or as performing or possessing masculinity. R.W. Connell argues that we cannot define masculinity as equivalent to men and we have to acknowledge that masculine conduct or identity can go together with a female body. Perhaps due to the pressures of the colonial time and the experiences of the Red terror, or perhaps as an effect of the violence surrounding them, many women characters from the Tigrinya novels published in the time of Ethiopian socialist and later mixed economic system (1974-1992) show some conventional masculine qualities. For example, to honour the brave woman Kidan, the 'Lioness' of the title of the novel *The Cub of The Lioness*, a song is sung:

'Dear Kidan the lioness, my beloved Kidan the lioness

May I call you mister or mistress'

Masculine qualities are observed in many other women in the novel like Kindihafti and Te'ame's wife. In the novels of the later period, there is an increased objectification of men, especially in the novels written by women, where often body parts of the male protagonist are described using similes such as likening lips of the man to the sweet millet cane.

However this doesn't decrease the objectification of women or elevate the status of women in either the men's view or in the view of the women themselves. These novels bear out what Tracy Tylka (2006) says in relation to contemporary America: 'Instead of seeing a decrease in objectification of women in society there has just been an increase in the objectification of men'.

The proverbs, lyrical Amharic oral poetry, Tigrinya novels, discussed so far, reflect all of the generalized masculine characteristics. They also prove that masculinities are not static; they are constantly changing from time to time, generation to generation, from regime to regime. There is much violence in the novels like *Forever Banging Door (Tesfaye, 1984)* and *The Cub of the Lioness* as they deal with Italian invasion and the Red Terror. However, the 'purposeful cultivation of ferocity' and the 'theme of masculinity as capacity to kill' (Mazrui, 1977; Gilmore, 1990) seems to be reflected nowhere. Whether it is the folk tales, proverbs, folk songs or modern novels, the revered masculine qualities that get represented are the ability to fight courageously in the time of need and the ability to produce good crop in the farm during the peaceful times.

In recent fiction other masculine ideals are slowly finding a voice. These recent works are yet not sure about these ideals, but are conscious of the socio-cultural changes and are yet contemplating their literary representations. As an example I wish to take up Endashaw Latera's (2008) English short story 'Son of the Father'. I see it as reflecting the changes coming in the Ethiopian society and as a story trying to come to terms with the problems associated with 'constructing' masculinity in the troubled times of change. The two main characters of the story are both male: father and son. The protagonist Kiya is an adolescent boy going through the usual turmoil of growing up and achieving manhood and fighting back the authority exerted by the father. In a way the story deals with the age-old father-son motif. The source of inspiration for Kiya and his friends is no longer the 'military man' but the football stars. Like all his friends in the group, Kiya wants to become a good football player, wants to conform to the ideals of the group of the younger generation. On the other hand, his father Gaddisa is a perfect example of the 'military man' described in Dr.

William Shack's study. He is reputed for his bravery and strength. He works in a government shoe factory during day time and at night works as local militia. He protects the community against thieves and thugs. He is a hero in Kiya's view but the story doesn't project him as a possible ideal for the next generation. Kiya doesn't want to become a local militia. His father too doesn't want him to be one. Gaddisa wants his son to get good education and become a successful man. The story undoubtedly etches a transient time not yet sure which masculine ideal to embrace from three:

1. The residual masculinity of the heroic military man,
2. The glittering world of the football star fast emerging as the most attractive male ideal,
3. The comfortable yet uneventful life of the educated salaried man which is necessarily the most dominant one at present

Local militia, football and school symbolize these available options. The first and the second options, in a way, are relatively unattainable: the first belongs well-nigh to the past and the second to the world of wish fulfillment. The third option, symbolized by school, is the least thrilling of the three and is seen by Gaddisa as the most desirable one for his son. However, Kiya, his friends and actually the entire young generation looks at it with disdain.

The story also reflects the ambivalence of the period regarding masculine ideals. The father's valour, vigour, dedication to the society, according to conventional masculinity, make him an 'ideal man', however, his emotional nature makes him effeminate. This ambivalence of a society going through a major change gets its most powerful expression in Kiya's cry of outrage at the end of the story:

'No, no Dad! You can't! You can't cry. You are the lion-heart. You are my hero' (Latera, p.19)

The short story is representative of the contemporary Ethiopian fiction which is marked by an ambivalence regarding masculine ideals which must be seen as an inevitable facet of a society going through major changes.

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