

“Womanhood”- as a Product of Moral, Material, and Imaginative Subject Formation

Patterns of Womanhood in Four Ethiopian Novels.

Netsanet Gebremichael

Introduction

Intertwined theoretical literature popular culture and social history makes it possible to argue that novels are valid historical sources to examine and show shifting trajectories of historical and contemporary of imaginations of womanhood. Fiction as one form of one modes of writing embodies notions of womanhood across time.¹ In this article, I read four novels closely to explore the different ways in which notion of “womanhood” is imagined, described and conceptualized in each novels. By raising question how are categories of womanhood characterized through fictional rendition of female characters? I will illustrate how novels reveal how a social, political and cultural process of an era formulates strands of womanhood. Fiction illuminates layers of categories womanhood, illustrating hierarchies of womanhood as one constitutive formation of being a collective women. The paper illustrates that layers of conceptions of womanhood emanate from how multiple historical processes came to shape notions of womanhood in articulation with the historically situated notions of bravery, patriotism, moral purity, national solidarity, motherhood, wifehood as constitutive part of womanhood. Such reading of womanhood from fictive assemblies of female characters illustrates the history of the imagination of womanhood in post1941 era in Ethiopia.

In so doing I mobilize Yonas Admasu’s suggestion on ways of evaluating selected Amharic text. Taye Assefa² discusses that one of the methods through which Amharic literary text is analyzed

¹ For more discussion on the productive sets of relations between fiction and history in excavating cultural representations embodied in fictive narratives in ‘ Nancy Rose Hunt, *Between Fiction and History : Modes of writing Abortion in Africa,*” 2007, *Cahires d’Estudies Africanes, Vol 17 Cahiers.*

² Taye Assefa, “An Overview of ICES Papers on Ethiopian Literature, 2000-2007,” *JES, Vol. XLII Nos. 1-2(June – December 2009)*

according to Yonas Admasu: is to be able to explore the text's "patterns of thinking" and methods of representation on the basis of "social, political and ideological conditions" under which the texts are produced. To this end the selection of four novels for analysis employ two broader thematic categorization. Three of the novels namely: *Araya*, *Adefiris*, *Ke admas Bashager* are inhabiting the Post war (1941-74) ideological, social and political era. While the Second broad categorization follow's Nancy Rose Hunt's suggestion of using fiction for historical site of remembrance, to this end I utilize an English novel *Beneath the lion's Gaze*, representing a Post-Revolutionary- ideological, social political landscape, and the novel as a diasporic meditation of post-revolutionary memories of the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia.

Framing Women in novels

Any literary work if used systematically is a valid historical source mainly to the social and cultural historian. The construction of social and cultural history pushes the historian to use unconventional archives such as the novels. It is noted that both history and literature involve in the production of narratives, however while the fiction writer constructs an imaginative story of the past that does not need a proof of evidence, the historian construct a narrative about the past based on the analysis and interpretation of evidence that defined as sources. While the author's imagination and creative skills are central in the production of literary narratives. Validity and reliability of historical sources and method of analyzing historical is central in the production of historical narratives. Literature involves in a detailed description of time, place and its imaginative characters. In so doing the novelist have a higher tendency to present an everyday life of a community or an event it sought to describe.

The novels of the realists afford us another way of looking at these phenomena. They go beneath the external manifestations, the macro-dimensions as it were, to tell what was happening inside the village and inside the huts of the villagers, what was changing and what was unchanged.³

It is in this regard Beverley Southgate argues that literature "... as one [of the]cultural artifact among many, fiction has always provided useful material, particularly for social and cultural historians."⁴ By reading literary works against the grain of the literary text the social and cultural historian can extract or account for the social values guiding everyday lives of the community of a given historical period. Even with availability of historical sources, the social and cultural life of the past that is not only excavated from state official archives, chronicles and

³ Jerome Blum, 1982: 139. *Fiction and the European Peasantry: The Realist Novel as a Historical Source*. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 126, No. 2 : American Philosophical Society

⁴ Beverley Southgate, 2009: 7 *History Meets Fiction*. Great Britain. Longman.

oral tradition illuminate the political and social imaginations that are put to work in framing notions of womanhood as written and circulated social- cultural sensibilities of womanhood in and through fiction. In so doing novels beyond their literary imaginative stories are repositories of everyday conditions of cultural and social lives, cosmology and forms of collective political imaginations of various social- cultural categories.⁵The novel is therefore a site in which popular imagination of varied social- political categories such as womanhood are constructed, represented and circulated in articulation with the probable of the social- cultural and political possibilities of a given era.

To this end tying feminist method of analyzing as Angela Davis⁶ points out enable us to challenge a taken for granted categories such as “women” and its “singularity, separateness and the wholeness of a range of social categories” Davis point out that feminist methodologies urges us to “to think things together that appear to entirely different and to disaggregate things that appear belong together.” It is with the intellectual resources of feminism that embraces instabilities of categories such as women, which I employ the notion of womanhood which entail hierarchies of subjecthood in women that are factored through differentiated yet connected imaginations of other categories such as men, class, social and political processes of a given time. Hence, taking this feminist view of disaggregated reading of womanhood in novels the following section illustrates the diverse categories which are at play in imagining hierarchies of womanhood in relational terms with historical categories which emerge from social and political processes of each era. Such a style of reading the novel for how it imagined and reproduced certain imagination of categories such as women illustrates the very category as a site of contested, hierarchized, silenced, objectified, and dignified re-constitutions of womanhood as constructed and imagined in novels as cultural artifacts of their era.

Notion of ‘Womanhood’ in *Araya*

Araya⁷: Background

The novel *Areáya* is written in 1960G.C by Germacaw Takla-hawaria, *Areaya* had a wide range of readership during the time of production mainly because it is used as an Amharic school text

⁵ “To gain a “true” perspective of the social values that underlie the mere factual aspects of the historic problem, one has to turn to the literature of the period under examination.” Alastair MacDonald Taylor, 1938:460. *The Historical Novel: As a Source in history*. The Sewanee Review. Vol. 46, No. 4

⁶ Angela Davis, 2012. *The meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogue* Oen Media Series / City Light Books , San Francisco.

⁷ Grmachew Teklehawariat , 1960. *Araya*, Birhanina Selam Printing Press.

book for grade nine at the time. *Araya* is also translated into Russian, by Mr T. Tyutyumovaa, a teacher of Amharic at Leningrad University. The name of the central character in the novel is Araya which is also the title of the book. The character Araya is a foreign educated young man, who has come back to his home country- at the wake of Italian Invasion of his country Ethiopia. Araya who has returned to his home country – Ethiopia to serve his people is then immediately caught in a broader national context whereby his return was not received with open arms. He instead received a cold reception from authorities of rule at the time. As a result, the character Araya travels to Harar.

Araya is described as a person who has respect for the tradition of his country and authorities rule. Given the role played in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the character is further characterized as patriotic. Patriotism is therefore fore described as one of the attributes of a “good “young men of the time. The moral economy of good young man is further characterized by acquiring virtues of “strength”, “faith” and “patience” while serving their country. In other words patriotism and piety are the constitutive elements of moral economy of “manhood” at the time. It is this moral attributes of a good young man that Araya is represents in the novel *Araya*. The moral dispositions of “goodness” in a man are also one of the constitutive notions of womanhood in the novel. Emét Sahile Mariam, Arya’s biological mother depicts notions of womanhood through ideas of religious chastity, “good” motherhood.

Nobility and womanhood: the Good “Mother” and Good Wife Construct:- Emmet Sahela Mariam (Areáya’s biological mother)

Areáya’s mother is a distinguished and principled woman who is highly regarded for her character. Her strong personality is common among the ladies. After the death of her husband, she refused to remarry and remained single. She was loved and praised by all her friends and relatives for maintaining a pious. decent life style. (Areáya, 15)

In *Araya* Emet Sahile Mariam is depicted as a virtuous woman who respected her tradition, a loyal wife to her dead husband and a caring mother. Religion, motherhood and wifeness are the triple characterization of a good woman in Emet Sahile Mariam. Her role as a mother is mainly discussed in this novel in relation to her son- Araya. Her identity as a mother is valued for having birth to Araya and the quality of rearing her son with values derived from Orthodox Christianity. Her motherhood is attributed to both fertility and the capacity to rear her son by offering care. Her role as a “good” mother is evidenced in Araya’s spirituality and moral uprightness. Motherhood is conceived as moral house of society in crafting generation in the image of its moral economy of goodness which is derivative of religious chastity. Motherhood is also

intertwined with to qualities of good wifeness. The good wife is attributed to remaining a widow in case of– Emet Sahile Mariam. The decision to stay alone after the death of her husband had earned her love and respect from friends and relatives. It is also implied that Emet Sahile Mariam has inherited this moral uprightness from the values and norms of the Shawa- a provincial identity. Here it is noted that what began to be an attribute of a single woman- Emet Sahile Mariam, emerges as attributes of a collectivity- shawan- Christian community. Therefore, a notion of womanhood is not only a notion of individual person Emet Sahile Mariam, but is also a category which is made to stipulate the place of moral uprightness of a collectivity. Respectability therefore is the constitutive feature of moral economy of good woman. Notion of good mother and wife is further elaborated as transnational attributes of good womanhood through by the depiction of Madem Debon Fuwa, as a good mother and a good wife:

One can tell that she is from royalty by just looking at her appearance. Her disposition, temperament and manner of taking illustrates she is a noble woman. It is also obvious that she is kind and considerate; Araya was touched by her approach and was immediately was drawn to her. She told him that she wanted to adopt a child from Ethiopia and that she has interest in raising him as her child (Areáya. 1964:20-21).

Madam De Bonn is a countess who was born from the renowned French nobility after her husband's death; she dedicated her life to her children. Unfortunately, she lost both of them in the war. Then she came to Ethiopia for few months to forget her sorrow and be as far away from the place of pain and suffering. After she arrived, she decided to raise and educate as her own, a single Ethiopian child. (But, is it fair to be inclined towards my biological mother? I am totally indebted forever to this woman for what she has done for me, what my mother has done for me is, give birth to me. But this lady is the one who has exposed me to civilization, and liberated me from ignorance. What had obliged this woman to do all the good things for me? (ibid: 33)

Madame Debon Fuwa is a French woman with a noble background. She is also portrayed as a wealthy woman. After the death of her husband and her sons in France, she decided to come to Ethiopia and adopt a child. Araya who by then is attending Swedish Missionary School in Harar became her adopted son. Due to this act, Madam Debon Fuwa is described as a wealthy, humanitarian and “Civil” woman. Her civility is portrayed with her act of charity and purpose driven kindness.

The notion of good mother and good wife is the common factor between Emet Shle Mariam and Madam Debon Fuwa. While religious chastity is considered to be the source of good motherhood and wifeness for the former, civility, Nobel birth, wealth is considered to be the source of virtuous mother and wifeness for the later. Civility is particularly demonstrated with the value derived from modern education. The generic good motherhood and wifeness characterizes both

Ethiopian and French women. However the good mother and wife are also represented as a differentiated and hierarchized conception of womanhood even within the framework of a good mother and a good wife. While for Emet Shle Mariam religious virtues are highly regarded as her sources of moral virtues. Attributes of a good womanhood is linked to civility, charity and wealth are considered features of good woman for and Madam Debon Fuwa. Therefore, the depiction of the good woman shares generic features of “good mother” and “good wife” but simultaneously represent different attributes of goodness in womanhood. These perhaps imply hierarchies of moral economies that at play in the constitution of good womanhood. Every epoch perhaps has a way to circulate a morally grounded notion of goodness linked to womanhood and this invites for a disaggregated and historically situated analysis of “good womanhood” that has been in circulation through literary imaginations. Such a disaggregated reading of notions of womanhood through categories of moral economies of goodness opens up a critical discussion on the ways in which womanhood has been mobilized to characterize as attributes of good citizens as a normative characterization of citizenship than a characterization of citizenship on grounds of political incitation. Womanhood therefore has been mobilized to stabilize notions of good citizenship at least in the ways in which literary piece has represented it to be the case. However the hierarchized notion of good “mother and wife hood” opens the notion of womanhood as a site of social, political geographical differentiation. This sets of differentiation is at play not only among hierarchies of womanhood but also in relational terms with manhood as depicted with notions of good mother and wife has a hidden a script on the role of manhood in the conception of womanhood.

Sirgut the “good wife” constructs.

Sirgut characterizes the “good wife” construct in the novel *Araya*. The novel establishes the relationship between a man and a woman under the institution of marriage. Marriage is considered as a social practice which gives the relationship between a man and a woman a desired and acceptable framework. In this novel the value of marriage is conceived beyond the bounds of the personal. Marriage is characterized as the social lineage which ties the personal to the collective. To be married is one of constitutive feature of fulfilling woman and man- hood. What is expected of a man and a woman in being married are varied for the time to time. For the man - is expected to be patient and materially prepared in order to get married. The good wife is to be found patiently:

Even though Areáya is extremely happy with his life in his country, he feels incomplete. Though affluence is never a problem it is known that man needs a partner for leading a steady life. Realizing this fact of life, Areáya wishes to have a wife but has decided to wait patiently until he could find his better half (Areáya, 308).

Araya is one example on how the good wife is to be gained through patience and wealth. The notion of a good wife begins with attributes of a deserving man. Attributes of a deserving man are attained through attaining patience and wealth. A good man is therefore is virtuously tied to a good wife. It is in context that Sergut is depicted as imaginative and creative product of Araya's own formation as a good man.

A wife is a life time mate who is always there in good times and bad times. It is important to first know why one needs to have a wife or a husband. A husband and wife need each other to lead a peaceful life and to have children and raise them endowed with good manners and principles. It is also to teach children to be able to pursue the hope and aspiration of their family's and the passion to make it come true. Areáya already recognizes this and is willing to marry. Hence, he waits until his life is established well and until he could get the ideal wife he was looking for. (Areáya, 309)

Procreation is another attributes of a married life. The notion of an "a good wife" depicted through Sirgut is made to characterize attributes of a desirable married life. In so doing the good woman sanctions the goodness of married life. The moral economic framing of womanhood therefore extends from constituting the good woman and is further mobilized to constitute social institutions of marriage in moral economic framing as a normative qualification of the good and virtues life. An analysis of categories that characterizes womanhood illuminates how characterization of womanhood through moral economic terms transcends the notion of womanhood. Womanhood in moral economic terms is rather further mobilized as constitute features of categories such as marriage. Hence a disaggregated reading of womanhood through moral economic framing illuminates to what else is at stake in the constitution of womanhood as a moral economic ways of being as represented in the novel *Araya as a cultural artifact of framing, validating and circulating sensibilities of womanhood in community.*

Womanhood in *Adafres*⁸:

A background

Adafres is a novel by Dagnachew Worku written in 1970. This novel situates itself in Armania, a small rural town in North Showa, the author Dagnachew explains that he has chosen the setting because it is a place where the Amhara, Oromo, Adal, Tigre lives together in the neighborhood.

⁸ Dagnachew Worku, 1962. *Adefirs*, Commercial Printing Press

The novel aims to represent a diverse ideas and communities sharing in a given setting.⁹ The novel mainly exhibits the contested understanding of living conditions between rural social setting and visiting urbanites. This social- ideological tension is illustrated through a characterization of tension which arises with a visiting university student- Adefris to rural communities in Armani- where the novel is set at. Adafres is a male character who has radical progressive perspectives. While members of the rural communities of Armani such as the land lady Woyzaro Asagash are struggling to maintain the values and norms of tradition. The novel presents us with the then contemporary debates on ambiguities of ‘old’ and ‘new’ “tradition” and modernity” in framing social values. It also exposes the uncertainties embedded within the socio-political debates of the time. Dagnachew has consciously built his characters from diverse sections of members of community and are made to represent diverse views embed in own lives. Tenants, servants, the ruling elites, priests, students and artists are made to say their views. In so doing the author engages in the then contemporary socio-political debates change through the novel. During his interview with Reidulf Molvare, Dagnachew asserted what how wants to say through his literary works as:

What [I] want to say through my books is that we are in this country together being together we have our differences, and yet what guarantees our survival is the values we have accumulated through generations. And this we cannot just throw out overnight. We cannot overnight replace the value we have been experiencing and feeling throughout our lives. Those values we have built take time to become part of our feelings and experience (Molvare, 1995:295)

⁹On May 1962, Birhanu Zerihun⁹ reviewed *Adafres* in then *Mennen* Magazine and predicted that the novel would be debatable both for its content and the new literary technics it introduced to the Amharic literature. Debebe Seifu,⁹ in his interview with Blen (literary magazine 1990:29) asserted that *Adafres* is one of the landmark works produced in Amharic literature. However, Debebe observed that the level of readership during the publication of *Adafres* was not mature enough to understand the novel’s literary technic and content. Zerihun Asfaw also added that *Adafres* has elements of a modern novel and yet is a unique literary text of its time - its use of local and fables to design its characters. On the other hand, Amare Mamo critiques the novel for being the most difficult novel; Amare states that the novel has been rejected by then contemporary readers because it was difficult text to read. Amare argues that the novel was not successful in getting warm reception from the readership of the time (Blen, August; 1990:27) Nonetheless; one cannot ignore the significance of *Adafres* as it has been and still is an agenda for literary debates and discussions. The novel has been reprinted in 2016. It has been narrated on a radio. In his assessment of “The Post-Revolutionary Amharic Novels” Taye Assafa⁹ writes: “The post revolution reader is therefore eagerly waiting to see works of eh aesthetic caliber of *YaTewodros Inba*, *Ka-Admasbashagar*, *Feqer Eskamakaber*, *Adafres*. But such works will surely be long in coming” (Taye Assafa, 1984: 604)

By so doing, the novel reveals the different layers of identities and their differing voices. The novel unfolds to show the complexities of social relationships as they are lived and narrated by different characters representing different social, gendered and class identities. The author primarily mobilizes the main character *Adafres* to expose uncertainties embedded in ideological battles of the time. The author seems to position himself as a critique to the leftist voices of the student movement at the time and regard the strategies of change. Speed overrides in the ways in which they want to change society. Dagnachew said the following about the naivety of his character, *Adafres*

Adafres is progressive but he should be progressive with other people. He rationalizes too much. He is not a practical person. Instead of acting he rationalizes. Rationalization is good but with limitation. He [Adafres] is like people we have today, the revolutionaries to waken people overnight but that cannot be done... our people can cope with change but not so fast.[Hence]there was no other option for *Adafres* than death. He was too superficial.¹⁰

This novel has abundantly covers the historical sensibilities or consciousness of the “voiceless.” These voiceless subjects are represented as women, servants, tenants and bandits. These subjectivities beyond their individualized voice are presented as subjects co-constituted of each other forming complex social fabric. Considering the primary objective of this paper, the following section presents an analysis on how the novel describes and re-inscribes layers of “womanhood”. One such stratum comprises of the “elite woman”, construct.

Framing a landlady: Woyzero Asagash

“The fear of God and to respect your superiors and to obey your land lady is the beginning of wisdom” Woyzero Asegash

The following section would show how characters are made to signify hierarchies of “womanhood” set in material relations.

Woyzero Asagash is one of the central characters in the novel *Adefris*. Woyzero Asagash is a wealthy widow with a noble background. Her wealth comes from inheritance she has received from her late father and late husband. In this novel, Woyzero Asegash is portrayed as a powerful figure in her community mainly because of her wealth. Her wealth has earned her respect and prestige in her community. Apart from her marital wealth, Woyzero Asegash attempts to maintain and depict herself as superior and demands performative symbolisms to back her powerful presence.

¹⁰ Reidulf Molvare, 1997, *Black Lions: The Creative lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers*, The Red Sea Press Inc.

When you see me coming along the road, don't dare bump on me but swiftly get aside" still exists. (And she orders her servant: "You [Romane]! Hold the umbrella for me and stand behind me and you [the man servant]! Sit here and intently look at my leg" (Adafres: 27)

Woyzero Asegash is not only satisfied with material possession but also demands a symbolic ritual of respect in her presence. She mobilizes both her material wealth and noble birth to build a superior status in her community. Her authority as a woman is drawn from a blood tie with her father- a man of a noble birth, material possessions, and ritualistic performance from her subordinates. Her domineering rank in her community is embodied in relational terms with other woman through relations of mentorship. Her aura is produced and maintained in the ways in which she administers her subordinates- men and women. Hence, the imagination of a powerful woman through Wro Asegash embodies, wealth, Nobel birth, and ritualistic performance from her subordinates specific to the epoch of power inhabited in womanhood at the time. In one occasion she orders her servant Romane to exhibit a bodily gesture of respect:

Romane , as I told you put your ceremonial best attire and stand behind my stool with the gesture of courtesy. You should be mindful of swallowing your saliva now and then. (Adafres:97).

It is evident that Woyzero Asegash intentionally demanded her subordinates to construct her image through their bodily and performative gestures. Woyzero Asegash not only uses her subordinates to appear powerful but also uses the blessings of her superiors to maintain her status in her community. Aba Addisie's blessings and advice, and teachings were central to the making of her image as powerful woman.

When Abba Addise discovered that (Sion) did not stop to play the Kerar, he told Sion's mother that she was possessed by an adulterous satan called Legion (Legewon). As a result, she was forced to quit her formal education and return to her village Armani. (Adiafres: 28)

Wayzaro Asegash warns her daughter and the people living under her to respect and honor their own "tradition." Their "tradition- as in form of religious values" she says is the only virtuous way of living. Wayzaro Asagash is aware that the knowledge of the foreign languages, science and music is regarded highly in offering "modern" sensibilities mainly among educated elite of the urbanite. However, she is of the view that "modern" ways of living are threats to the already existing values and norms of her communities. However, she expresses ambivalent sets of relations with modern education. She selectively embraces some modern sensibilities such as learning the English language. This is illustrated through choices she has been making for her

daughter Sione. For example she instructs her daughter to study English alphabet, and makes her demonstrate literacy in front of a guests:

Yes! People from Addis Prefer those who are modernized I do not want my only child to be considered as traditional! I especially want you to talk to them in Ferenji (English) language! And I also want you to show them your science notebook. Yes! It is important that they realize we deliberately disregard everything which is modern! (Adafres: 24-25)

Therefore, Wayzaro Asagash illustrates ambivalence of the time between tradition and modern sensibilities of life forms. The daughter is constructed as a negotiated outcome of what is considered traditional and modern and hence womanhood in Sione as an embodiment of ambivalence. Sione as a social and cultural product of tension illustrates womanhood as a product of unceasing sets of encounters among a set of social and cultural forces. Changing gendered norms are produced at the site of encounter. In this equation, while Sione represents the constitution of womanhood at the site of encounter between tradition and modernity, Wro Asegash represent notion of womanhood that produces the encounter from the side of tradition whose womanhood is derived from noble birth, wealth, reverence to one's own local knowledge and tradition while simultaneously expressing the desire for modern education through her daughter Sione. The depiction of Wayzaro Asagash as a powerful woman is not only located in the ways in which she disciplines the subjectivity of her daughter Sione, but also driven from material conditions of life as a land lady.

Landladyism: Wro Asegash and Her Male Tenant Gorfu:

It is because God, with your mistress, has conspired against you, took the grace and charisma away from you and reduced your wealth. Had your harvest been plenty, you would have lived with pride. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Then follows to respect your superiors and your land lady. You are conceited and that is why you are beat by lots of hardships. Look at me, God granted me his grace and the Emperor the respect I deserve; but, I never indulge in self-importance who am I after all? I am a small shabby rodent. As you are witnessing, because I make myself humble before God and the Emperor, they in turn magnify me. This is typical deed of a human being endowed with heavenly power (Adafres: 7-8).

The above extract illustrates a relation of tenancy intertwined with gendered relations between a landlady and her male tenant. Wayzaro Asagash, characterizes landladyism as a material construct of a wealthy woman. The tenant Gorfu is constructed to illustrate the object of relations which produces Wro Asegash as a landlady. He is made to accept both the justification given to the nobility of his landlady and her right to exploit his labor. Such a skewed form of power relations between the tenant and the landlady is revealed in form of relations of power between

the sexes mediated through relations of tenancy placed in material condition of access to land and labor.

In this case, gendered power relation is enacted by a woman character with domineering role towards her subordinates men and women. Secondly, this form of socio-political trajectory depicts that land was the major source of economic and administrative power. Thirdly, noble birth of Wayzaro Asagash indicates inheritance and decent as a source of respectability and wealth for women. Therefore, the image of a powerful and influential woman within the patriarchal social structure tends to have a passage of rite. For instance, Wayzaro Asagash, has appropriated her power from the society and gave it back by being loyal to the already existing system of power relation-patriarchy. Thus, the production and the reproduction of a powerful woman is an outcome of negotiation with patriarchal powers at be, expressed in relations of religious chastity, inheritance, land, tenancy, symbolic subordination. This constitution of womanhood problematizes the binary of imagining the man as “oppressor” and woman “oppressed” and rather illustrates womanhood as negotiated outcome of the oppressed and oppressor binary sets of relations. The class aspect of womanhood is further illustrated in the ways in which the ‘servant’ character named Romane is portrayed in the novel.

Framing Romane

Romane is the daughter of Woredofa, her mother died at a young age. Her father and Romane are kept as Madaro/ tenants to Wayzaro Asagas. Madaro as it is described as a form of administrative institution in which tenants fail to pay their tributes to their landlord or ladies are forced to pay their debt through their labor to the landlady- Wayzaro Asagas.

Consequently, Romane work in the house and much of her story is narrated through her daily duties in the house. Her daily routines also set her free from certain spatial restrictions. Activities like fetching water from the stream provided her with the opportunity to meet people and other fellow servants of the house. During such times Romane shares ideas and rumors of the house and the neighborhood. It’s during such scenes that the author offers Roman’s interior desires and wishes of her life in deliberation to other people. Her service or daily duties gave Romane the opportunity to meet people and deliberate, in one occasion Romane tells Adefres about her aspirations in life:

Adafres, I think the day of your wedding is approaching?”

Romane ĩ will hide and run away.”

Adafres, “Don’t you want to get married? Why will you run away? And where would you go?”

Romane, “wherever! It is better even to die anywhere instead of being kept as a madaro here in the country. I will go to Asmara by lorry.”

Adafres, Äsmara? Isn't it better to go to the nearest, Addis Ababa? If it were to Addis, I may try to help I mean, to find a job in ferenji homes and get an employment as a babysitter or a dishwasher”

Romane, Nothing can make me happy than going to Addis Ababa. The problem is, I can't speak the language of the faranji. Ah, if only you can help me get a job, I will do whatever, whatever you ask me to do. I can even through myself into the fire (Adafres: 120-121).

The above conversation tells us that Romane has already made up her mind to flee to the capital- Addis Ababa. She seemed to have chosen to be a servant on the basis of her choice than marrying someone she does not know. Yet, Romane does not expect the city to offer her a colorful social status. Rather she expected her labor that made her a servant here in the countryside would also help her to become a servant in the city and earn her freedom to go to school. As we read in the novel, there was not much of time left for her to wait and see her dreams come true. When Wayzaro Asagash decided to give her hand for an arranged marriage Romane, decided to flee from Armani her home town to a nearby town Dabrasina, where she becomes a sex worker. She gained her “freedom” by running away from Wayzaro Asagash. Therefore, through Romane the novel depicts a historical form of administration such as madaro and indicates the ways in which subjects such as Romane coped with such social system. In addition, it also exposes that escape from authorities such as Wayzaro Asagash and arranged marriage is a way to express their discontent and simultaneously gains her freedom. Escape therefore entails both relations of subordination and enactment of freedom.

For Romane her escape as a “free” woman from the tyranny of Wayzaro Asagash and the institution of arranged marriage is conditioned by being a sex worker. Her earlier vision of becoming a housemaid in the city and going to school got curtailed with what was possible to be in Debresina. By so doing, the author shows his readers the ways in which the servant identity of a woman transfers to another layer of identity- sex worker, which further illuminate womanhood as identity gained in form of contestation. Womanhood therefore entails an antagonism for self-refashioning as an exercise of what is possible and impossible to be.

Framing Frewa: The Hope of the Future

Frewa is a daughter of a high court judge Ato Tegu. She is portrayed as a very confident and bright young girl. She always projects her views without fear. Frewa openly rebels against unacceptable norms and values in her community. While simultaneously, acknowledges the wisdom and knowledge that are to be found in local socio- cultural institutions. She does not

totally disregard tradition as bad as Adafres does; instead, Frewa makes a case for maintaining values and norms of one's own community by thoroughly examining and understanding them.¹¹

Frewa. "Your approach and mine are totally different. While mine is with a heart full of compassion and much consideration...."

Adafres, "Mine is blunt and careless."

Frewa,: yes it seems like that even if it is not the case. If your consciousness has excelled beyond the fear of God, she could also transcend beyond the chele (sacred beads) to worship God. The consciousness that gives the arts, painting sculpture, history and science a spiritual intent would also give the sacred bids, worshipping oak, and the covenant a spiritual intent.

As for me the kind of progress that comes without being considerate to the emotions, beliefs and values is better not achieved than achieved by intimidation.

Let me tell you one thing, everyone primarily needs, love, understanding and respect clinging on the rhetoric that states westerners are mighty, strong would be the devastation of our own. Looking at our people like a complete stranger is not right. Rather, try to mingle with your own people and know their customs and heritages. Come up with your own ideas instead of the borrowed ideas of the west. Consider the problems of your country through your own eyes, then thoroughly study and speculate about them. If you need to bring forth solutions, wisely and actively take gradual steps. Do not ruin (uproot) everything" (Adafres: 268-273).

Frewa is depicted as a category of womanhood who is educated, yet values her tradition as well, in this sense she represent a self-made person of influence who mediates the tension between tradition and modern ways of being. Thus the author positions Frewa not only as an empowered and critical woman but also as a woman who pose a critical question to the revolutionary voice of the time. Freawa's influential authority arises from her regards and critical reverence to local knowledge forms as well as acceptance of modern education. It is in this sense that I argue that examining of female characters in novels is not only a doorway to understand layered constitution of womanhood but also unpacks the role of other historical categories such as "Tradition vs. Modernity, tenancy, values and limits of modern education. The author's choice to embodies his critical voice through Frewa, entails the possibility in fiction to imagine the imaginable and introduce new ways of imagining womanhood as that whose wisdom and power comes from a critical exercise of examine values and norms of community without dismissing

¹¹ It is also possible to argue that Dagiaw seems to use Frewa's voice to project his ideas and reflections. In his interview with Molvare, Danacaw asserts: "We are together in this country and being together we have our differences and yet what guarantee our survival are values that we have accumulated through generation. And this (our values) we cannot just throw out overnight. We cannot replace the value we have been experiencing and feeling throughout our lives. Those values that we have built take time to become part of our feeling and experience. This is the central thing/theme of my literary work" (Molvare, 1997:29

their affirmative values. A socially, politically, historically and critically embodied womanhood and perhaps personhood too.

Womanhood in *Ka-Admas Basagar*¹²

The novel *Ka-Admas Basagar* also describes the urban subculture of Addis Ababa and the dilemma the educated youth faces at the time. *Ka-Admas Basagar* is a literary text situated in an urban context. Its primary subjects are the intellectual environment of the country and the intellectuals of the time. This novel observes the socio-historical experience of -young foreign educated returnees. Historically, the time has a number of foreign educated young scholars holding government offices who were trying to cope with intellectual environment of their time and create their own. On this regard, Sifaraw Baqqala ¹³writes:

Bealu's finest work *ka-Admas Basagar* is a novel par excellence; it is a novel about the educated class of the country. The major characters Abara and hailamariam as well as their colleagues went through the education system (of the time) General Winget (in many cases), university college of Addis Ababa, and then the U.S for Master Degree (Sifaraw, 2006: 35).

As the intellectuals of the time, Abara and Hailamariam have been continuously contemplating about one's own choice in society. In doing so, the author seeks to show how young intellectuals started to frame the question to authority and their individual quest in life. The novel posits the two educated men Abera and Hailemariam who are challenging their social values. In so doing the then present society is framed as archaic and unable to answer the question of the individual. Characters such as Abera and Haile Mariam illustrate individuals to have their own choices and desires that are unique to them, hence should not be burdened by society's expectation. This novel considers a society whose constituent systems and subjects of history are at war. The newly emerging thought was imported without a critical understanding of their context through exposure of education. It came as a resistance to the already existing and long standing social values and norms. The author shows us that the growing city Addis Ababa becomes the safe have to the youth that thrived through its dance floors, prostitutes, bars, government offices and schools. Living in Addis had become a comfort zone for the newly emerging young and "critical voice" of the time. The newly emerging socio-cultural shifts is adopted and lived by people like Abara and Hailamariam. Educated men are depicted as those who are endowed with start to raising new types of questions. In their reflective deliberations they mobilize 'women', 'older

¹² Bealu Girma, 1962 *Ka-Admas Basagar*, Artistic Printing Press.

¹³ Shifaraw Bekele, 2006. "A Modernizing State and the emergence of Modernist Art in Ethiopia (1930-1970) in *Gebre Kirstos Desta*, Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

generation' as objects of their analysis. The novel presents men as the prime narrators of their setting and of other characters, such as women, their own childhood and the social and political condition of the time. The author intentional or unintentional chooses of men characters as narrators.

Womanhood in *Ka- Admas Basagar*:

This novel presents various categories of womanhood to project its story; this study would only consider three characters to expose layers of womanhood represented in this novel. The following analysis would therefore consider Susana, as the construct of the “Western/ White woman” Lulit as the construct of an urban Ethiopian woman ‘and “the nameless women – groups of sex workers as the three strands of womanhood in *Ka- Admas Basagar*

The “white’ woman construct

Had it not been for the accidental presence of Susan Rose, who was a member of the Peace Corps, in Abara’s life, the idea of buying this radiogram would not have come true. Susan Rose repeatedly told Abera that “men who choose the best of anything impress me because when I meet men who prioritize expensive and precious items, my self-esteem revives as a rose which has been watered well”. She (Susana) can’t give and take love without music (*ka-Admas Basagar*: 8-9).

This novel frames Susana within a historical context of the arrival of the Peace Corps to Ethiopia. Susana is represented with broader historical process through which foreigners finds their way to Ethiopia. Susana is described as a woman who desire men who buy expensive gifts for a woman. She states that her worth is articulated through the culture of consumption of expensive goods. As part of exercising her desire she made Abara buy her an expensive radiogram. In return she makes love to him. Susana is also depicted as a music loving person so much so that she does not stay in bed without music. Consumption culture is not in goods but also cultural artifacts such as music. In reading Susana, there is a construction of a commercialized construction of desire, placed in relation of exchanges, reciprocity as expressions of womanhood. The construction of womanhood tied to socio- economic status is further illustrated through the characterization Lulit.

Lulit: the fair goddess

His magnificent eyes are fixed in another place. He could not break his gaze and turn his eyes to Haila Maryam. With his piercing eyes, he traces her naked chest, her long neck, her circular shoulders and her rose like lips. While her shiny black skirt absorbs the candle light, her sparkling emerald-like earrings reflect it back. Her toe which comes out of the front of her golden slipper mocks on people as a tongue of less mannered child. However, she is not a kind of woman to be referred as charming, but she is attractive enough to give a man a start. She has a short forehead with a pointed nose which is curved upwards at the tip. Her full lips resemble a blooming rose tempting those who look at them (*Ka-Admas Basagar*: 37).

Lulit is portrayed as a beautiful woman. Beauty here is represented in feminine Lulit who is described by a male character Abera. Abera's attention as a painter is drawn to Lulit through sensibilities beauty embedded in her physical – bodily attributes. Lulit therefore offer visual-bodily –inspirations for the painter- Abera both through her physical features and as an embodiment of beauty itself. The female body is here depicted as a soul searching venture for the painter Abera. The reader gets to know Lulit for most part of the novel through Abera's description- which highlights her physical description. It is only later in the novel that Lulit comes to narrate her own life story beginning from her childhood.

Lulit describes her subjectivity as a woman by linking her experience being a virgin and experiencing rape in her childhood. Chalu- who later becomes Lulit was raped as a young girl. The experience of rape made Chalu change her name to Lulit. Lulit in her narratives exposes the contradictory vision of womanhood that is embedded in a culture of rape; Lulit breaks out the culture of rape through an act of re-naming her, escape from home town. Chalu – gets bitten up by her husband and father for not being a virgin after she got raped. The community who wanted her to stay a virgin – rapes a girl and punishes her for not being a virgin. Such contradictory vision of sexual purity is one of the ways in which subjectivities of womanhood is created. However After she fled from her home town to the city helped by a foreigner, Chalu becomes Lulit and joins Empress Menen School. The city life gave Lulit transformative experience of womanhood placed in education, office work, nightclubs, and consuming expensive clothes. The city turned her in to a goddess.

Lulit's embodiment of 'womanhood' is an articulation of pain and blame and disembodied bodily admiration. When her life moves from rural to urban Ethiopia she transformed herself to a level of goddess. It is these sensibilities of admiration and rejection in one female body- that Lulit inhabits. It is this ambivalent notion of subject formation between rejection and mystification of being a goddess that Lulit embodies traversing between Chalu and Lulit. This further reiterates the conception of womanhood as unstable and transformative agency even in one person Lulit- Chalu.

Clustered womanhood: 'the Nameless Women'

As Abera has expected, there was nobody except four women. It was difficult to distinguish one from the other in the red light. Two were dressed in the national dress the other were dressed in a very short skirt that fitted tightly around their body Abera chose the woman whose hips were broad and who did not seem as restless as the others. He entered saying "one who hesitates gets nothing" he took her hand and dragged her inside

(to the bed room) the others skimmed her out of envy. The three women surrounded Hailemiriam said to him ... (You) what can we offer to you then? They started saying to him. (Ke Admas Bashager, 1962:34).

Clustered womanhood refers to a group of women characters who are accounted as sex workers. The notion of clustered womanhood is attributed to the homogenous ways of categorizing these women through their occupation. Hence, this observation is indicated to note one example of translating singularities in to grouped and collective identity. This is achieved through categorizing the four women only on the basis of their common occupation- Sex Work. In so doing their bodily identifications are described through a comparative gaze who emphasizes the size of their lips and hips.

Through the substantive representation of sex workers the novel presents its underlying assumption about womanhood as a product of a sexualized male gaze. The clustered women-representing sex workers then further illuminate the clustering of all women as objects of sexual gratification for men. The novel presents a homogenized categorization of women from a stand point of sexualized male gaze, and normalizes such gaze.

Abara: “So you have turned to the line of Hailamaryam: if it hadn’t just been for mere act of pride the pleasure a man gets from a lady and a maid would not have had any difference (Ka-Admas Basagar:11).

However, it should be noted that discourse on the sex worker varies among other novels of the time. While Ka-Admas Basagar depicts the construction of the sex workers as homogenous groups, *Letum Aynegalegn*¹⁴ a novel by Sebhat Gebreegiziyabiher, treats the story of the sex workers with their individual names, their individual agency and life complexities. Their individual stories is given equal credence to narrate the complex social relations in the then Wube Beraha. Wube bereha is a social and cultural hub inbuilt with many bars, night clubs, where most young people- men go to entertain themselves with drinks, women and music. Hence in such social space sex workers and lovers are depicted as central figures of the place – wube-bereha in the novel *Letum Ayinegalign*, which also gives a differentiated account of womanhood in sex workers.

The ways in which the notions of womanhood is mobilized to build female characters in the above analyzed three novels, *Araya*, *Adefris* and *Ka- Admas Bashager* illustrates womanhood as projection of subject formation intertwined with varied kinds of catagories of being.

¹⁴ Sebhat Gebreegiziyabiher, 1954. *Letum Aynegalegn*.

Subjectivities are formed in womanhood through the intertwined workings of moral economy, with socio-political and economic differentiation, wealth, occupation, race, culture of rape and self-refashioning, physical beauty. The notion of elite woman - Wro Asagash in *Adefiris* is different from elite woman in *Araya* and different from the goddess image in *lulit*. Womanhood is a differentiated set of subjectivities whereby the role of moral uprightness and material conditions of life are the two key factors of differentiation in womanhood. It also noted that the notion of moral- economy and material constitution of subject hood in womanhood changes across time. While noble birth was regarded respectable in *Araya* and *Adefiris*, *Ka-Admas Bashhager* attributes respectability to physical beauty- sexual liberation, bodily features and grooming costumes makes a woman desirable. A shift from respectable to a desirable womanhood. The shift from respectability to desirability in womanhood itself shows a singular and collective experience of social change, while *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* offers a reading of womanhood as a site of articulating a historical question and hence, where fiction meets history.

Womanhood as a site of historical Question: Where are the women in Revolution?

Beneath the Lion's Gaze:

Meaza Mengiste in Her novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*¹⁵ provides another example on the role of religion-examining the changes and continuities of subject formation before and after revolution. Maaza's notes that for the youth, revolutionary consciousness and social change meant rejecting tradition. Through showing the difference of values between the young and the older generation the author achieves to pose a historical question about the changing role of religion in organizing moral economy of the family and the nation.

Narrating the nation through the family¹⁶

Beneath the Lion's Gaze is a novel written by Maaza Mengiste, an Ethiopian Diaspora novelist, published in 2010. The 1974 Ethiopian revolution and the immediate years after revolution is the time and Addis Ababa is the location of the story. The objectives of the historian is to expose the historical argument, and question that underlies or inform the fictional narrative in this novel mainly pertinent to the notion of womanhood it embodies.

The family is a prism through which Maaza shows the dynamics and terror of the period. Through the everyday experiences of the family the author depicts the social and political context of the time. The family comprises of Hailu a prominent medical doctor as the father, his 32 years son, history professor at the University, with a daughter and wife and his last born

¹⁵ Meaza Mengiste , 2010. *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*

¹⁶ Maaza Mengiste, 2010:1-104 book one

Dawit a revolutionary student at the university. The author depicts her main character Hailu as a loving husband, responsible father and a diligent doctor. He is framed to be sympathetic and loyal to the Haile Selassie regime. Hailu is not alone in this endeavor his own older son does not have any regard to the revolutionary students. He detests the looting and violent protest organized in the name of change. The author invites us to note the generational aspect of public protests by not only representing the older generation through these characters but also by not showing us any one older person supporting the student protest. We should also note that is Emperor is 82 years old at the moment. Old age signifies wisdom, maturity, respect for ones owns tradition and seniority. It has also depicts the emperor as an embodiment of the historical legacy of 3000 years history independence and civilization. Dawit the youngest son, on the other hand, as the youngest in the family is categorized with, young protestors and young soldiers who characterize themselves as agents of revolutionary change.

The novel as a site of memory: Remembering and imagining the nation¹⁷

Social and political stability entails a fresh start for the nation. The family which was anguished by revolutionary violence is reunited by shared experience of torture, imprisonment and loss. Both the old and young generation reconfigures their identity as Ethiopians due to undifferentiated experience of loss, death, exile and imprisonment. Maaza indicates that the post-revolutionary Ethiopia has a new national imaginary that is born out of the post- revolutionary terror. For her it is this experience that assembles the young and the old, the rural and the urban, women and men, the dead and the living, home and exile. In this regard she shows as the family reunited the nation beings a fresh. One of the seminal roles of the novel is that it provides a new ways of imagining the nation. Historical raptures such as revolutions are followed by new ways of imaging a political community. Thus, through her work of fiction Maaza takes her share in selectively remembering revolutionary era. Furthermore, the notion of narrating the nation through the family offers the social historian an insight in using the family as a historical framework of analyzing collective historical experiences.

Imagining the Ethiopian nation as a new beginning resonates with the 1994 constitution which declares “we nations, nationalities, peoples of Ethiopia are coming together to form the Ethiopian nation.” After the fall of the military regime both historical accounts such as the constitution and literary artifact heralds a new beginning. This time witness the coming together of a historical and literary imagination. The new post – revolutionary generation claims the revolution by defeating the military regime. Maaza finishes her novel by getting the family

¹⁷ Ibid,2010 theme that cuts across the entire book.

together. While the official narrative about the military regime is a narrative of defeat and the victory of the people and the current regime, Maaza frames the post- revolution era as an era of loss, exile and survival. While the official narratives focus on the image of victory, the popular imagination crafted through this novel is a memory of loss and absence. Maaza's account of the revolutionary change read against the official narrative gives us the emergence of yet another form of popular imagination of the new nation which includes not just the victor but also the dead, the tortured, the exiled and the survivor.

Yet have survived by going in to exile. In her last chapters Maaza's points out the phenomenon of exile. By so doing she opens up a new way of imagining the nation from diasporic location of the present. The production of memory of a nation from diaspora notes a historical shift in the ways in which the Ethiopian nation has been narrated and remembered. The imagination of Ethiopia as a place of death and imprisonment began to emerge mainly during the military regime.

The Revolutionary women: Acknowledging Absence¹⁸

Unlike the official history of the time this novel presents the image of revolutionary women. Maaza points that just as their male counterpart's women of the time are tortured, imprisoned and killed. Through fiction Maaza poses a question as to where the history of the women who took part in the student movement and suffered under post –revolutionary terror. Thus she answers her own question by constructing women among the young revolutionaries. Although her attempt to include women in revolutionary struggle is still the work of fiction, the silence on the history of women in the revolution and other social and political movements is evident. It is only this year 2013 that we have a memoir of a women and her struggle in the student movement, entitled *Tower in the Sky* by Hiwot Tefera. Thus Maaza's fictional interjection in the existing male dominated ways of remembering the revolution can provide a historical question to the gender historian. Perhaps the fictional character could encourage many women who read this novel to write their histories. Yet interestingly enough; the family through which the author attempts to imagine and narrate the nation does not have a revolutionary female figure. The author not only attempts to account for women's involvement in the revolution but also indicate their absences in the national narratives. Therefore, Maaza's portrayal of women as both absent and present in the revolution raises historical question as to what was the involvement of women in the student movement. Although it is a fictional account of the time this novel points to the absent narrative of the past and task the historian to reconstruct the history of the student

¹⁸ Ibid, 2010: a theme that runs across the book

movement in which women are present with their histories. In so doing Meaza delivers a contribution through her novel in constructing the revolutionary women and opens an invitation for the need to reconstruct histories of women in the revolutionary narratives.

Conclusion

Womanhood is a differentiated subjecthood which results from an interplay of a number of social and political process of a given era. In the above analysis we have noted that four novels use notions of moral economy, imaginative exercise of desirability and material conditions of life to portray differentiated notion of womanhood. This is illustrated in the ways in which the notion of “good-mother”, “good wife” “modern woman” “desirable woman, is depicted as normative constitution of goodness in womanhood. However, hierarchized material condition of womanhood destabilizes the normative constitution of womanhood through illuminating differentiated material subject formation in womanhood. We noted in the construction of “wealthy woman” “noble woman” “educated- white- modern woman” and the clustered womanhood represented through sex workers inhabits different social strata’s of womanhood which entails the material undercurrent that is in play in imagining womanhood.

It is also noted that as much as moral- economy in form of respectability and hierarchies of womanhood in material condition of life produce differentiated womanhood, the portrayal of differentiated womanhood also illustrate shifting notion of moral economy. The shift from religious chastity to a desirable woman on the basis of beauty and to the revolutionary women is one such example which illustrates changing notions of respectability that are placed in changing sensibilities of moral- respectability expressed through womanhood. It is this changing constitution of womanhood which seeks a historically situated analysis of womanhood. The various ideas of subject formations in womanhood such as religious chastity, wealth, property ownership, noble birth, education and consumption culture, physical beauty, notions of virginity and rape, sex work and revolution offers a historicized and differentiated notion of womanhood both in submission and omission of womanhood along these categories. Although fictive in their construction varied attributes of womanhood, the above novels offer a methodological opening of reading differentiated and disaggregated patterns of womanhood in History which opens up a quest for a historicizing of each strand of womanhood as historical subjects.

Similarly the shifting notion of womanhood in these novels illustrates the shifting notions of concept as freedom, oppression, motherhood, wifehood, respectability, beauty, family and

revolution through the category of womanhood. It is intertwined co- constitution of subject formation in womanhood through moral economy and material conditions of life that embodies womanhood as an entangled, unstable, constantly contested and negotiated ways of inhabiting an era. This further illuminate that the category women is not a stable category and has to be made sense of in historical terms by illuminating how each epoch creates new forms of womanhood in contestation, in silence, in didactic formulations, in material sets of relations that are at work in antagonism and as a product of social and political processes of an era. Womanhood is not only symptomatic of the social and political processes at work but is also an embodiment of evidence of absence of in history. In so doing novels play a role in pointing towards to categories of absence or omissions in historical narratives. Through offering fictional representation revolutionary women, such as *Benath the lion's Gaze* points out the under representation of women in the narrative productions of 1974 Ethiopian Revolution at least until the novel was published in 2010.