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# **Images of Amhara women in oral poetry**

### **Abstract**

The objective of this article is to describe the thematic images of Amhara women in oral poetry. The study is based on field research conducted in rural areas of Western Gojjam and Awi Zone. The data was collected by observation, interview, and focus group discussion. For documentary evidence, twelve informants were selected with the use of a purposive sampling technique. The research method employed was ethnographic qualitative description. The result revealed that the images reflected through oral poems address women mainly as wives, their particular aspects refer to love, woman's attitude towards marriage issues, divorce, and include general knowledge, understanding of the life and personages within women's worldview. By the same token, oral poetry portrayed those women as inferior to men. Finally, the study recommended a further research on oral literature of Amhara region of Ethiopia.

**Keywords:** image of women, gender theme, oral poetry, Amharic

## **1. Introduction**

Women in Ethiopia occupy a low status position in the society, although they represent half of the population and contribute significantly to food production and perform many other duties. On some occasions, they may not have shared the fruits of growth as have their male counterparts (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1994: 10). Furthermore, Ethiopian women in most families are in an inferior rank to their brothers and male counterparts. Given the heavy workload

compulsory at an early age, premature marriage without choice, and a submissive function to both husband and mother-in-law, girls and women are left with few opportunities to make and act on their own decisions. These and related events are mirrored in oral poetry. Thus, oral poetry as a medium of cultural communication has been recognized as one of the significant means to record the marginalization of women (Furniss & Gunner 1995: 21ff). The cultural images connected with women reveal and endorse the social philosophies and viewpoints of the society. Woman has been given both positive and negative images in society.

The oral poetry reflects social attitudes in general and women's views which are their clear manifestation. However, the researcher's recognition shows that no study on images of women in Amharic oral poetry has been made so far. This work intends to fill this gap in the field of interpreting oral poetry. The main objective of this study is to analyze the samples of Amharic oral poetry from the point of view of creating an image of women. Therefore, the specific objectives of the study include:

- to examine images reflected through Amharic oral poetry,
- to explore gender themes which are rooted in the image of woman in the Amhara society.

## **2. The role of oral poetry in traditional society**

Oral poetry is the genre of literature which is composed and transmitted without the aid of writing. Oral poetic customs deal with the poetic creation and the public performance, when the poem is sung (Toelken 1996: 55-60). Oral poets are distinguished by the joy of creation. No matter what poets perform, they create and recreate; their art is fostered and hold up through the use of customary accompaniments (Alembi 2002: 35). For traditional society, oral poetry is the repository of the important knowledge, philosophy, and wisdom. It offers an image of life as experienced by the humanity in its particular time and place with its sole existential challenges (Alembong 1996: 121; Sone 2009: 162). Oral poetry summarizes the traditional knowledge, beliefs and morals about the situation and the nature of the social order itself. It arises in response to the widespread aesthetic images to present narratives that explain the nature of life and describe human responses to challenges (Hurreiz 1986: 87). Oral poetry also portrays how one is to live a moral life and explains the nature of one's relationships to holiness. Oral poetry thus retains the society's knowledge to be passed on to succeeding generations (Gellner 1987: 8-12). It contains the history of the society

and refers to women's experiences in particular. In various forms the oral poetry portrays the society's system of beliefs that makes sense of women life.

Oral poetry intended for traditional society is also the repository of an artistic expression accepted in the society. Its beauty resonates across human cultural frontiers. Oral poetry is an imagery response to the universal human being instinct to find sense of balance, synchronization, and beauty in the world and the need to understand pain, suffering, and evil. It can explain the causes of human suffering, justifies them, and suggests ways of arbitration and the remedial of suffering (Okpewho 1990: 80-88).

Oral poetry serves as a medium of education. Historical information as well as the accumulated knowledge of the people is transmitted through songs and dances (Miruka 1994: 118-20; Okpewho 1985: 258; Zewde 2000: 34). It also serves as a reservoir for the culture of the community. The songs also serve as a means of social control. Through such poems, the societal and cultural values, customs, and traditions are perpetuated.

As for the question of performance, oral poetry is the authentic instance of formation that can be performed at homes, various workplaces, different festivals, wedding ceremonies, and other customary contexts. Spectacular capability and the playing talent of the players is oriented at maintenance of the audience (Lindfors 1977). Thus, performance is all the time important in oral poetry. Performance is the form of expression which employs poetic speech that causes interaction<sup>1</sup>.

The position of oral singers in the social order says nothing about them as oral poets. All the singers are illiterate, but they express a desire to attain expertise in singing oral poetry. In the occurrence of apprenticeship as a poet they have to follow stages like listening and absorbing, application, and finally the stage of singing before an audience. In the first phase of their preparation they sit or stand aside at the same time as others chant: they enthusiastically hear the music of their elders and learn about the heroes (Bauman 1986: 4).

The performance starts with established formulas. Subsequently, performers of oral poetry implement the most important constituents of the outward appearance, the rhythm, and melody (Bauman 1977: 11). The subsequent stage is based on a procedure of simulation in which the singers reproduce the *modus operandi*

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<sup>1</sup> On various aspects of performance see Alembi 2002, Bauman 1977, Fine 1984, Finnegan 1970, Finnegan 2012, Okpewho 1990, and Okpewho 1992.

of composition known from their master or masters. It is worth mentioning that the singers learn to sing by a procedure of adjustment through listening from which a large amount is put into practice. The education process ends when the singer is capable to sing songs all the way through for a significant audience. At this time, singers are able to modify some parts of the song as they wish in the long-established outward appearance. In this way, their repertoire enlarges and their capability develops. At the third stage, they establish their repertoire of songs; they are also improving the singing of the songs that they have already known. They start mounting the songs. The ability of expanding the older songs and of acquiring innovative ones is carried to the top at which they know how to keep their audience amused for a full twilight which is one of their goals. The concluding phase of preparation comes to closing stages when the singers' repertoire is great and sufficient to offer entertainments for quite a lot of contexts. This stage is noticeable as the singers gain popularity in the society and become part of its cultural profile. The lead singers never stop in the process of building up, recombining, and remodelling the procedure and images contained in their songs.

The extent of presentation devices correlates with contexts surroundings which stimulate audience's attention. The poets' ability to compose poetry contributes to the predictable self-motivated scenery of oral poetry. During performance, miscellaneous parts of the body, such as face, hands, shoulders, neck, and other parts are used to create an accompaniment playing a role in making the performance attractive (Okpewho 1992: 46-47).

Structural variations are typical components of oral poetic performances. Therefore, the audiences are impressed more by players who show a number of imageries with the text of the song than by those who merely recite their lines without human intervention. While reciting and performing the intended oral poem, devices like repetition, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, piling and association, tonality, idiophones, imagery, digression, allusion, and symbolism are taken into consideration (Bauman 2011: 9; Finnegan 1970: 13).

Amhara oral poetry displays characteristics of oral poetic performances known from other parts of Africa and elsewhere. Oral poets can represent any class of the Amhara society (Gelaye 2001). One additional mode of poetic performance is the use of kebero and other similar instruments for producing impression for the audience and the poet as well (Alembi 2002: 36). The most distinctive element of the Amhara oral poetry is transmitting the images which represent cultural code in social behaviour. Gender themes belong to the most commonly used and the most attractive in oral poetry.

### 3. Gender in Ethiopian context

Gender is a set of characteristic roles and performance patterns that differentiate women from men communally and ethnically and determine relations of power between them (Hirut 2005: 16). These distinctive roles, behaviour patterns, and power relations are dynamic. In Ethiopia, they vary over time and are diversified between various cultural groups. Therefore, the meanings of gender are culturally determined and their content should be investigated with regard to their constant shifting and variation (Hirut 2004). Therefore, gender events can be identified as action, locus, visualization, and power, among other things, and they function as components in the identification of different roles of men and women.

The deeply rooted patriarchal culture prevalent in most societies of Ethiopia attributes power to men at both home and the community level. Thus, Ethiopian society retains women in an inferior position. There is a conviction that women are passive, obedient, enduring, and tolerant of monotonous work and violence, in which culture is used as a justification (Cherinet & Mulugeta 2003: 10). In Ethiopian society, girls are brought up to conform, be submissive, reliant, and specialize in indoor activities like cooking, washing clothes, fetching water, caring for children, etc. Moreover, women are responsible for most of the food production process, clearing the land, preparing soil, sowing, weeding, harvesting, transporting, and performing many post harvest activities. They also shoulder various livestock management tasks. Responsibility of bearing and rearing children, necessary practices to insure the natural tradition and continuity of life rests on women.

This study takes descriptive, ethnographic, and thematic approach in studying the images of Amhara women in oral poetry. It is attempted to record the live phenomena which are reflected in this poetry as holistically as possible. By purposive sampling, the researcher has judged who could provide valuable information to achieve the intended objective. This sampling technique (Kumar 1996) was used to contrast events. It enabled to capture the real contexts of various phenomena, which were little known. Thus, the first task was to record performance and relevant accessions of oral poetry in different socio-cultural contexts (Fine 1984: 99). The field research was conducted in the rural areas of Western Gojjam and Awi Zone where oral poetry and related ethnographic data were documented. All informants represent only the Orthodox Christians. In this context, the majority of oral poems were collected from women performers. Few folk poems were also captured from men poets. Consequently, the performance in live settings on relevant occasions and information were captured through interview, observation, and focus group discussion.

The interviews were carried out with carefully selected 12 (10 female and 2 male) key informants who were recognized as knowledgeable and skillful in composing, reciting, and singing of the Amharic oral poetry, as well as in traditional dancing. Moreover, two focus groups (Bruce 1987) and discussions with other intended informants yielded important information. According to the nature of the behaviours recorded, some direct and indirect observations were conducted.

The method of data analysis employed in this study included collection, thematic classification, and analysis (Jackson 1987). The image analysis of oral poetry includes the live events of oral performance, the socio-cultural events, symbols, and the meaning of anything from the context of women's world (Bruce 1987: 29, 63).

## 4. Images of women in Amharic oral poetry

### 4.1. Woman's emotions: Expressing love and affection

Woman's affection and attitude towards man's love is often expressed through Amharic oral poems. Women use a wide variety of phrases related to emotional attitudes which are in line with love, as Alemitu Jembere performs in (1):

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| (1) <i>Yesētītuma bal birch'ik'o neh<sup>2</sup></i> | <i>Glass like a husband of another woman<sup>3</sup></i> |
| <i>Fik'ir adek'ek'eny ketef bel bakih.</i>           | <i>Your love has crushed me, please come.</i>            |
| <i>Ihud k'idamē bimet'a minew?</i>                   | <i>When will Saturday and Sunday come?</i>               |
| <i>Indemar k'ibē yemīt'afitew.</i>                   | <i>Who is so sweet as butter and honey.</i>              |

According to the above poem, the persona<sup>4</sup> loves a man who has a wife. She favoured to introduce him through his wonderful appearance of white glass.

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<sup>2</sup> The transcription of the original Amharic texts follows the convention known as "BGN/PCGN 1967 System" designed for use in romanizing names written in the Ethiopic script approved jointly by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN), and the Permanent Committee on Geographic Names (PCGN) for British Official Use.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the research objective, the translation was concentrated predominantly on the content, tone, and meaning of the Amharic oral poems. Once the researcher understood the content of Amharic oral poetry, he simply re-cast them into English using his own literary comprehension. Researcher tried to maintain the similarity of style, but the main goal of translation was the transference of the thematic images from the Amharic to English language.

<sup>4</sup> Oral poetic words such as 'singer', 'composer', 'performer', 'persona', and 'poet' refer to the same actor in oral poetry performance. A *persona*, in the word's everyday usage, is a folk poetic role or a character played by an actor.

The glass in the study area has a special significance. It represents beauty, cleanness, and good look. As a result, she applies this metaphor in order to describe the attribute of the man whom she loves. She informs that it is the feeling of affection that crushed and hurt her. She strongly asks to share the love affair with him, which has currently come into sight. She is waiting for Saturday and Sunday. The culture of the study area (particularly rural) strictly imposes parental consent on her making love with a man. Thus, on those days either her father or mother may not be present at home. For example, on Saturday her family may go to the market. On Sunday, they also may go to the church. Hence, as she informs, they two may have a good opportunity to make love.

In the Christian view, however, only true love between husband and wife draws the richness, beauty, and joy from the love that Jesus brought from heaven to share with his friends. Thus, the poem performed at workplace portrayed it as in (2):

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| (2) <i>Iwodihalehu yegzēruni<sup>5</sup>,<br/>Habt alfeligim Yezemenuni<br/>Atek'rihalehu ijguni.</i> | <i>It is the love of Jesus that I wish,<br/>Modern wealth, I do not wish for<br/>From your love, I want warmth.</i> |
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According to the beliefs held in the study area, since the love has planted in the human heart, it brings the joy of life which will last forever as the gift of God himself. It is a holy thing, but no less delightful because it is holy. It is certainly what God intended for Christians and for a Christian marriage. Therefore, the singer suggests her love is as warm as God's love for human beings. True love cannot be exchanged for modern wealth. Therefore, she seeks a deep-rooted love from an imaginary lover. On the other hand, in the poem (3) which was performed at a coffee ceremony the love warmth is referred to as a "roasting action" in the woman's world:

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| (3) <i>K'ilētam aluny silafek'erkuhu.<br/>Iwnetawanma inē awk'alehu<br/>Kezih ager k'urt'imati.<br/>Minew bezafu lay bewet'ahuti?</i> | <i>When I love you, they say she is roasting.<br/>I know the truth is<br/>Oh! The backbiting rumors of this country.<br/>Shall I climb up a tree?</i> |
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As expressed in the above poem, the actions of the performer are seriously criticized from different perspectives. Her love is considered dishonourable behaviour. The opposing view which disturbs her social life comes from her neighbours. They considered her as roasting. According to her view, she asked them

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<sup>5</sup> The name of God and Jesus are represented in Amharic as አግባብ-ብሔር (*igzābihēr*). Using the oral poetic composing freedom, the performer changes this name into *yegzēruni*.

what she should do? Where should she go? She asked a hypothetical question: "Shall I climb up a tree?". Love is an experience of the body, the soul, or both. There can also be a sexual understanding and it can give rise to emotions ranging from delight to despair, as expressed in (4):

- (4) *Fik'irihna zarē bamet'achihut t'at'a*      *My love and my Satan are matching*  
*Nefsina sigayē ch'erso liwet'a*      *My body, and my soul is being demolished*  
*Silefik'ir amlak tewuny alik'et'a.*      *For the love of God, please do not punish me.*

As portrayed in the poem (4), the separation of the soul from the body takes the lovers apart from each other. It is not an ending, but it is the beginning of a new cycle. The poem ends with the image of a circle, the symbol of accomplishment, representing the union of souls in a love relationship. As she stated, Satan<sup>6</sup> that possesses her together with her lover demands her life be unpleasant and distasteful. In this case, her body as well as her soul were worried, disappointed, and tormented. Thus, she strappingly begs both the loved man and Satan to create peace in her life. She might have rested when the anticipated personality made contact within her in a love relationship. However, love's warmth is kept secret, as expressed in (5):

- (5) *Bemist'ir yanorkutin simētēni.*      *I was keeping the feeling secret.*  
*Minew serek'hew libēni.*      *You have stolen my heart.*  
*Isun lemesebseb yedekemkutni.*      *That I have scarified to collect.*

In this poetry, the persona uses the current imagery – her imagination is two-dimensional and double edged. On one side, she has been keeping the event secret. On the other side, she has tried to collect the isolated thoughts. This shows that the love recurrently repaired and confused her. Perception and thought continuously fuse in her mind, so that she could see the conception and the originator all at once involved in the situation.

## 4.2. Woman's attitude towards marriage issues

These days, women are using the songs to break down barriers between couples, the obstructions that keep husbands and wives from fully expressing their love

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<sup>6</sup> The Devil or Satan is the epitome of evil as it is imagined in many and diverse cultures of Western Gojjam and Awi as well as in the Orthodox religious traditions. Satan is seen as the objectification of an aggressive and destructive force. In Christianity, evil is personified in the Satan, a fallen angel who is the main enemy of God. According to the belief, held in the study area, Satan terrorizes the world all the way through evil, he is the direct opposite of truth, and shall be fated.





According to the poem, marriage is the unique relationship of a man and woman joined together by God in a union. He wills it to be both permanent and exclusive, binding the couple to each other in a lifelong companionship of common life and conjugal love (Gen. 2:23-24, Matt. 19:4-8, Rom. 7:2-3). Therefore, a marriage joined by God is very strong and amalgamated as a bond. As the singer emphasizes, no internal or external occasion can prevent their marriage from lasting forever.

### 4.3. Woman and divorce

According to the tradition, divorce happens after a husband, a wife or both decide not to live together anymore. It may sound simple, but it is not easy for a husband and wife to decide to end a marriage. Often they spend a long time trying to solve problems before deciding to divorce. However, sometimes they just cannot fix the problems and decide that a divorce is a natural part of life which is hard to deal with.

Some people get married, divorce, and then remarry. In most cases, marriage ends after a divorce, and the couple never remarries. On the contrary, a singer requests remarriage, as in (9):

- (9) *Banteguday mendedun sichē,* *It is because of you I lost the road,*  
*Yihew met'ahulih libēn kefishē.* *I am coming back, my heart is being opened.*  
*Kelijē abatim tefatichē.* *With the father of my child, I will divorce.*  
*Lagbah indegena kemīstih k'emichē.* *Remarrying, let us be transformed.*

In this context, sexual incompatibility and the related reasons may be missing on her side because marriage is concluded not always out of love. She is looking for a quick divorce. The performer with irrepressible libido cannot be faithful to her partner. Therefore, when her heart becomes open, the imaginary journey to the first husband starts. She has a child from her former partner but she is now going to divorce the present husband. The divorce turns out to be the closing stage. Therefore, she is trying to convince the former partner to restore the marriage.

Only occasionally both people in the couple want to separate and every so often one wants to divorce but the other one does not. Usually both parents are disappointed that their marriage cannot last, even if one wants a divorce and to live apart more than the other one, as in (10):

- (10) *Aynē tessek'lo bante guday.* *My eyes are being slung.*  
*Libē tessek'lo bante guday.* *My heart is being stolen.*  
*Inē aleknim izīhlay.* *In this moment, I do not stay.*

*Mīstihin fitat alkuh.  
Guzoyen jemerkuhihi.*

*Quickly, split-up with your wife.  
I am coming forth rapidly.*

As affirmed in (10), divorce hurts the woman's feelings when she stays on living in the house where they lived. It is hard not to take it personally. It is important to remind herself that divorce happens between the husband and wife, and even though it affects her life. She falls in love and wishes to live with a new man. Due to the context, because of love's warmth, her eyes are being slung, and her heart is being also stolen by his love. At this moment, she looks as if she never stayed with the current husband. She informed that he ought to divorce his wife rapidly. He must not let up, since she is running towards him to get in touch with a new marriage.

Everyone has his or her own reasons for wanting a divorce. The most common reason people give for their divorce are lack of assurance, too much disagreement, and faithlessness. In the present song, the lack of communication aggravates the future divorcees, as in (11):

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| (11) <i>Kolo berēwum t'imad newu.<br/>Haylu berēwum t'imad newu.<br/>Fetashalehu maletim limadh new.<br/>Fetalehu kalkma fichīwun dengigu.<br/>Yishalen neber lijochachin bīadgu.</i> | <i>Kolo ox was given by somebody as a loan.<br/>Haylu ox was given by somebody temporarily.<br/>Divorce is your recurrent contemplation.<br/>If you decide, formulate a separation.<br/>Leave it, for the sake of our children.</i> |
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The poem (11) says that the described person may have a valid reason to divorce but she does not refer to it when the divorce occurs. According to the poem, the couples seem poor. Two oxen are not their wealth. Recurrently, the husband seems to be nagging that divorce is his persistent contemplation. She turns out to be very aggressive. She initiates the separation and confidently says "if you decide, formulate a separation". However, she wants to raise their children with him. This is because many children do not want their parents to divorce. Some kids may have mixed feelings about it, especially if they know their parents were not happy together. A number of children may even feel relieved when parents divorce, especially if there is a lot of fighting between the parents during the marriage:

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| (12) <i>Yelijochē abat simany milewuni<br/>Abren inikrem yezendironi.<br/>Kermos alat'am lēlawuni.</i> | <i>You man, the father of my children<br/>For this year, let us keep on together.<br/>Upcoming, I might have another.</i> |
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The poem manifests a strong feeling of displeasing, hostility or antagonism towards the partner. The spouses seem to fight a lot or say many rude things to

each other. In this respect, she has tried to convince him to stay together until the marriage ends in divorce. She does not know the exact date of divorce. She is forced to search for another marriage. A woman has her own reasons for divorce:

- (13) *Wofch'o fech'alehuny indefechita. I am not a skillful grinder<sup>7</sup>, but I am crushed.*  
*Temekrēm neber wodante indalmet'a Don't go with you, they advised*  
*Angeragralehu kengidThis, Onwards, I will say be careful,*  
*Wondimē yiseral guarowunis. My brother can build the shelter.*

According to the poet, she didn't acquire the capacity to perform an activity related to grinding, but she tried to crush crops. At the beginning, parents informed her that the intended husband will not marry her. Now, disagreement is created between them because of an unknown reason. If the current disagreement is continued, she may not stay silent. She would prefer to live with her brother:

- (14) *lyet'et'ah arek'ēwuni<sup>8</sup>. You become captivated by alcohol.*  
*Abek'enkew nibretachinini. Our prosperity has ended.*  
*Bemin lasadig Ijochin? How will the children grow?*  
*Bel tidarachinim yifres Our marriage ought to end*  
*Nedijē almotim inēs. Otherwise I will not burn up.*

As she states, her husband has become addicted to alcohol. The abuse prevents the marital bliss because of the change in his behaviour, which makes an adverse impact upon the couple's mental peace and physical security. Thus, an aimless habit of her husband highly affects the relationship and the entire economic system of the couple. This leads to a personal as well as mental conflict. Because what the singer wants the husband to do, the husband does not do, there are dissatisfaction and frustration. The exacerbated financial problems lead marital needs to remain unfulfilled and create discontent in the minds of both spouses as the one who cannot give feels humiliated and the other one is frustrated. She asks him with what means they will feed their children.

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<sup>7</sup> This folk song was taken from a grinding task in Awi. In Awi and Western Gojjam, grinding is basically the task of women. Crops such as yam, sorghum, oats, wheat, barley, millet, and teff have been ground for centuries either with a crude mortar and pestle fashioned from a tree stump and branch or by using flat stones or rubbing stones. All these types of grinding systems are still in common use throughout the study area.

<sup>8</sup> *Arek'ē* is the type of alcohol locally made at home by women.

#### 4.4. Woman as an inferior

In the study area, the division of labour is gender based. Every member of the family knows his or her role and responsibility in the economic production and distribution of family resources to ensure the material prosperity of the group:

- (15) *Sīmeshm sīnegam beza nīzniz.* *Her nagging frequency has reappeared.*  
*Kengidīh behwala abren anguaz.* *From now onwards we cannot walk together.*  
*Lenēm mebt yinureny bahilum yiserez.* *Let me have freedom, culture shall be broken.*  
*Inēm indantehul lēla sew liyaz.* *Like you too let me have another partner.*

The poem (15) talks about the situation in which the man has sexual relations outside of marriage. This leads to a disagreement. In some Awi and Western Gojjam cultures, married women unlike men are not permitted to have multiple associates. For this reason, having more than one partner is regarded as morally wrong, but only for a woman. Thus, she is perceived as a promiscuous woman while such a behaviour of her male counterparts (even those who cheat their wives) is tolerated by the culture.

Due to this, the singer wants to break the existing male dominance. She is convinced that the disagreement that just occurred in between them must be stopped. From now onwards, the woman does not allow her husband to have extramarital sexual relations. If his reprehensible behaviour has no end, she is enforced to have sex out of marriage as he does. She intends to address the man's illegitimate ground rules. Moreover, the image of male dominance has been cueing up, as in (16)<sup>9</sup>:

- (16) *Sēt kesētinetish latalfī.* *You are woman for eternity.*  
*Berē temdeshm latarshī.* *You can't plow up the land by oxen.*  
*Minim inkwan bitk'ejī bitgagrī* *Even if you beaked and fetched*  
*Ikul menager atchīyim anchī.* *You cannot speak equally like me.*

As portrayed in the folk poem, gender stereotypes are powerful forces of communal control. In Awi and Western Gijjam, it is commonly accepted that the task of plowing up the land is a men's duty, whereas the task of carrying water in a jar

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<sup>9</sup> Folk poems (16) – (24) were performed by the male folk poets at harvesting and plough work occasions in 2019 in Awi and Western Gojjam. Harvesting is the process of gathering rip crops from the field. Reaping is the cutting of grain for harvest, typically using a sickle. Men and women participate in this work. A plough or plow is a farm tool, traditionally drawn by oxen and horses, for releasing or turning the soil before sowing seed or planting (only in Awi).

and baking belongs to woman. In actual daily practices, the household and fieldwork tasks of women exceed those of men. However, he says that his wife's everyday jobs were less than his daily activities. As a result, she cannot speak equally with him. This wrong male supremacy activity is socially acceptable in rural communities of the study area. Similarly, the subsequent male's oral poetry depicts this situation, as in (17):

- (17) *Yebalwan amel mīst kalchalechiwuma,      Wife should tolerate the husband's temper,  
Ikul kemelesech iswam indegena.      If she answers equally like her husband.  
Ibelt'alehu kalech tesastalechina.      She is wrong if she acts as superior.  
Yihew tebelashe migbar ahun gena.      Now the comportment has been distorted.*

As stated in the above poem, women imagine themselves as submissive to their husbands, even if the husbands are incorrect and unreasonable. They are women who do not complain when they are treated inadequately. According to the poet, women should be recognizing their assets and they may actually guard their husbands from the consequences of a cruel behaviour:

- (18) *Arshē balabelash anchīni.      I plow the soil therefore you eat.  
K'ofrē balabelash mīstēni.      I excavate the land, as a result you eat.  
Min yiwut'ish neber ahun?      What would happen to you if I wouldn't work?*

According to the singer, the status of a woman is based on her relationship with her husband in terms of labour and economic circumstances. He confirms that farming and digging tasks in the farm field are entirely the tasks of the husband. Due to this, his wife is dependent and hides behind her husband's farming occupation. This wrong assumption explains the status of a homemaker as obvious while the woman stays idly at home expecting to be supported by her husband. The image of woman's idleness is more descriptive in (19):

- (19) *Sinesa siwodk' lij asadig biye.      To grow children, I go up and down doing.  
Senefnesh mindin new yenēhod mistiye,      Why you became indolent, my wife,  
Ine baldekim balefama,      If I do not go up and acquire responsibility,  
Bētachin bēt ayhonima.      Our living system might be at risk.*

In the first line of the poem the speaker states that he is the only one responsible for earning money to bring up the children. In the second line, he puts emphasis on the woman's idleness and care freeness, as he knows that even if she did not work, the husband would provide everything for her and their children. The poet is convinced that he is responsible for everything at their home. Thus, his wife may be also depicted as malevolent. Moreover, in the last line, he indicates the

extent of his superiority. He nervously describes his wife's manner of dependence as she profits from his achievements. The significance of the place occupied by women in the social order is best captured in the subsequent folksong:

- (20) *Yewend diha alawk'im yeseṭitun injī. I didn't know poor man, but women.*  
*Yihinin iwuneta atawuk'iliny anchī. (You) don't be aware of this happening.*

As stated in the above poem, men and women have different roles and responsibilities in the society, the causes and experience of poverty are also differentiated by gender. Rights such as access to land, credit, and other productive resources are difficult for women to attain:

- (21) *Bebirtuw kindih arseh iyabelah. You feed us by plowing with your strong arm.*  
*Lijina mistihn tastedadiraleh. You administered to our children and me.*  
*Inēm bebēt siraw yihew alehulh. I am here at the household works.*  
*Zim bleh k'uch' bel mechēm yebelayneh. Take a seat, lastly you are superior.*

According to the poem, an assortment of outlooks of women gives the impression of a multitude of roles allocated to them by society. Woman acknowledges the social thoughts towards him. As a result, the speaker of the poem accepts that she is inferior to him and is supposed to be in an inferior position in the house. She also comes to the conclusion that her husband is physically stronger than her. The fact that she is not gifted with the same strength that would allow her to carry out comparable actions as a man, men's roles are more significant than hers are.

#### 4.5. Woman as a wife

In Awi and Wesern Gojjam societies, both men and women are encouraged and persuaded to get married. The wives' role is supposed to be subordinate to men. They anticipate being excellent and accountable wives to their husbands as in (22):

- (22) *Yihew yizeshinyal ashmonmunesh You are handling me as shimmering*  
*Menfek' indalmolaw indelijish, Like your small child,*  
*Hiywotē bejish nat yaziny ibakish. My life is in your hands, please take it.*

The song depicts the fact that the persona has a good wife who thinks about her husband, is graced with his presence and is open to all his needs and desires. Due to this, he strongly needs to care for her like for their small child. She also agrees to act as her husband tells her to do, to share his likes and dislikes, and to pay respect to him.

In the study area, a woman is perceived mainly as a mother. As a result, she is viewed as the foundation of the family unit as in (23):

- (23) *Yebētē meseret yenuroyē mama,                      You are the base of my house,*  
*Minim hiywot yelem mistē yalanchīma.                      Devoid of you it is not life at all.*

According to the husband's view, his wife forms the establishment of the farmstead, and devoid of her, the homestead might be broken. The woman, though in a subordinate role, is the essential person in securing the wellbeing of the family and the home. It is true that his wife is the homemaker; there is no home without her in the sense of his social and economic life. The speaker of the poem depicts his life through her performance in different circumstances. He claims that there is no life without her. As a result, the foundation of their life is based on her daily activities:

- (24) *Yetik'imt abeba libel marshetē,                      A flower of December, let me say, honey,*  
*Kushnaw aymok'im aydemk'im ibētē,                      The kitchen and our house have no warmth,*  
*Banchī imebētnet yisakal minyotē.                      My goal is accomplished by you.*

As portrayed in the poem, flower and honey are used by a man to describe his wife's beauty. At the same time, the poem refers to the idea that the kitchen work responsibilities lie with the woman to strengthen the stereotype that the man is the only provider for the family and his wife's place is the kitchen. As stated in the poem, his objectives have been accomplished with the help of his wife's household activities.

## 5. Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to describe and analyze the current thematic images of Amhara women in Amharic oral poetry. The result showed that the images fashioned in the oral poetry portray women as inferior to men, particularly in their physical and rational capability. In this regard, the authority to manage the public and other structures of the community is given to men. On the other hand, oral poetry propagates traditional perception, commenting on local actions, relaying history, instilling pride, and accepting shared aims. Similarly, the critics of local actions, love, marriage, divorce, and personage images are reflected in the oral poetry.

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