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## **Women and Men in Arsi Oromo Proverbs: an Implication for Gender Equality**

**Ayehu Bacha**

Department of Oromo Folklore and Literature, College of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Jimma University, Oromia, Ethiopia  
[ayew.bacha@yahoo.com](mailto:ayew.bacha@yahoo.com)

**Lenin Kuto**

Department of Oromo Folklore and Literature, College of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Jimma University, Oromia, Ethiopia  
[leninkuto@gmail.com](mailto:leninkuto@gmail.com)

### *Abstract*

*This article is aimed at investigating how men and women are portrayed in Arsi Oromo proverbs. To do this, proverbs are placed in their wider cultural context and philosophical outlook of the people. To this end, interview, focus group discussion and document analysis were used as a method of data collection to generate data on the topic under discussion. Contextual approach was exploited to analyze and synthesize raw data. Multifaceted nature and functions of proverbs are thoroughly discussed in the lens of cultural context. Thus, the finding of this research unveiled that there are many proverbs portraying both sexes positively and negatively when seen superficially. However, this research has concluded that (1) it is impossible to wrap up whether women are subordinate or not and men are dominant in Oromo culture by selecting proverbs in which women and men are directly or indirectly mentioned, (2) the philosophical outlook of the Oromo does not support the claim that proverbs are weapon for women' inferiority and (3) proverbs which seem contradictory to each other are complementary and cannot give an insightful picture about gender philosophy of the society if detached from worldview of the society. Thus, proverbs should be placed in the worldview of the society from which they are flourished and their many edged functions/natures should be taken in to consideration.*

**Keywords:** *Oromo/Proverbs; Women and Men Inferiority; Gender Equality.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Proverbs are mirrors in which a community can look at itself and a stage on which it exposes itself to others. They describe its values, aspirations, preoccupations, and the particular angles from which it sees and appreciates realities and behavior. What we call mentality or way of life is best pictured in them (Healey and Sybertz, 1996: 35). The wisdom of proverbs has guided people in their social interactions for thousands of years throughout the world. Proverbs contain

everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language, making them easy to remember and ready to be used instantly as effective rhetoric in oral or written communication (Meider, 2004: XI).

Proverbs accompany daily speech and hence reflect every aspect of life. People validate their way of thinking, feeling, attitude, wishes and ideas through proverbs. In the same move, Oromo oral literature in general and proverbs in particular is the curator of the peoples'

philosophy and worldview. Thus, proverbs, if analyzed deeply can give exact picture of the peoples' way of life, their beliefs, their worldviews, their etiquette and social values.

Oromo proverbs have been focus areas of study for many scholars. These scholarly works are those aimed at describing and analyzing proverbs in general and those focusing on portrayal of women in proverbs in particular. Accordingly, Korram's (1972) work on collection of proverbs from Eastern Oromia, Mengesha's (1992) collection and analysis of Oromo proverbs and sayings, collection of proverbs by Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau are important scholarly contributions for the collection of Oromo proverbs. Tadese's (2002) article entitled as 'social functions of Oromo proverbs' focused on functional analysis of some Oromo proverbs.

Particularly, Sena (2002) and Jeylan (2004) have extensively dealt with how women are depicted in Oromo proverbs. The study conducted on the way proverbs construct and perpetuate inequality between men and women by Hailu (2010), image of women in Oromo folktales, folksongs and proverbs by Ahmed (2010) and gender roles and society's perception of women in Macha Oromo verbal arts by Berhanu (2005) are also notable.

There are also studies dealing with portrayal of women in proverbs of other cultures. For instance, Proverbs and patriarchy: analysis of linguistic sexism and gender relations among the Pashtuns of Pakistan by Noor (2015) and the portrayal of women in Tigrigna proverbs and proverbial expressions by focusing on the stereotypical beliefs and behavioral tendencies by Solomon (2015) are worth mentioning. Jeylan (2009) in his article entitled "A Discursive Representation of Women in Sample Proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya" has concluded that there are strong intertextual and intercultural

threads between the ways proverbs represent the roles, statuses, and identity of women and perpetuate inequality.

Though the above mentioned works depended on fieldwork, they lack contextual and critical analysis of interpreting proverbs. Therefore, the current research is significant as it is the first attempt to study gender related proverbs in a balanced analysis of wider philosophical outlook of the people under investigation.

- To explore the images of masculinity and femininity in Arsi Oromo Proverbs
- To investigate how proverbs mirror philosophical outlook of the people in relation to gender
- To examine when and how gender imbalance were originated in Arsi Oromo proverbs
- To scrutinize the main functions of Arsi Oromo proverbs related to gender

## METHOD

Collecting voluminous proverbs within a short period of fieldwork is impossible; it actually requires years of work. Thus, to collect proverbs pertinent to this topic effectively and efficiently, the methods developed by Unseth (2008) were considerably used both in interview and focus group discussion sessions. These include (1) gathering a group of people together and providing beverage and foods culturally appropriate to start informal conversation which allows for the free flow of the conversation (2) using situations to remind people of proverbs, (3) using types of people to remind people of proverbs, (4) using key words to remind people of proverbs, (5) asking people for proverbs with related meanings and (6) using proverbs from nearby languages. On the other hand, the researchers had many other research projects in the study areas. Since there is no as such special stage for proverb usage, the data were collected by using all opportunities obtained because of this

extensive and long fieldwork projects. The researchers also pursued their Bachelor and Masters Degree and specialized in folklore and cultural studies which helped them to analyze the multifaceted nature of proverbs and significance of context in studying folklore genres.

Herzfeld (1991) has clearly put that proverbs are difficult to recall from memory without an eliciting context or situation. Due to this reason, employing methods which are common in social sciences pose difficulties when studying proverbs. Hence, interview questions have been framed by using methods developed by Unseth (2008). Interview has been made with relevant individuals in the study area. In line with this, elderly women and men were interviewed. Ten informants were involved in these sessions.

Asking people to simply list long lists of proverbs in their language will only elicit a fraction of the proverbs. The biggest hurdle is generally helping people to remember their proverbs in an artificial elicitation setting (Unseth, 2008). Taking this fact into consideration, the participants were given different topics of discussion like proverbs in which men and women are mentioned, intelligence of men/women, the relation between husband and wife, behavior of individuals and proverbs composed of wellerism in FGD. Similarly, by using proverbs that have already been collected by using interview method, the researchers asked for proverbs that have similar meanings to generate additional proverbs. This method enabled the researchers to elicit as many proverbs as possible since people with different profiles were accommodated in the session. The discussions were made in a vernacular language to help the discussants to recall proverbs. In view of that, 6 FGD sessions were organized to produce diversified proverbs.

Document analysis was also employed. Accordingly, proverbs were also

collected from published articles and theses. Many proverbs used for analysis in this work are taken from Sena (2002) and Jeylan (2004) for they have dealt with the issue in detail.

It is very tricky to put precise definition of proverbs for they touch upon every lived experience. Having multiple nature and vast content, its definition poses difficulty. Though many scholars are reluctant to define proverbs, those who tried lean towards their structure and function. Mieder (1993, 2004, and 2007) and Mokitimi (1995) have convincingly shown that while some proverbs have been dropped because their language or metaphor does not fit the modern time, new proverbs are emerging constantly to reflect contemporary mores. Mieder (2000) argues that even the most sophisticated and best educated people appear to be in need of the pithy wisdom contained in metaphorical proverbs, and as such, there has been no general collapse of proverbiality and no blackout of proverbs during the time of reason and rationality.

Hussein (2009) compared the 33 representation of women in sample proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya, and found a synchronic prevalence of the sexist proverbs which show that there are intercultural similarities in the way women are treated; and that there is simultaneity and connectivity in the patriarchal worldview in the countries which serve as ideological weapons used to persuade the public of the assumed weaknesses, fragility, and powerlessness of women (Hussein, 2009:105).

Many authors explicitly or implicitly argue that most of these derogatory proverbs have been originated by men to express their jealousy and fear of women, and maintain that women have seldom originated proverbs since men have historically dominated literature and society (e.g., Kerschen, 2012; Schipper, 1991,

2003; Dieleman, 1998; Thorburn, 1978; Granbom, 2010).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contextual approach was exploited as a theoretical framework to examine Arsi Oromo proverbs in their contexts of use. This was basically because this approach considers the interrelationship of context, meaning and function.

The contextual approach to the study of folklore was developed in the second half of the 20th century by folklorists such as Roger Abrahams, Dan Ben-Amos, Alan Dundes, Robert Georges and Kenneth Goldstein. They took the concepts of “verbal behavior” from linguistics, “functionalism” from anthropology and linguistics, “ego mechanisms” from psychology and applied them in the study of folklore. In the study of folklore, thus, “they object to the text being extrapolated from its context in language, behavior, communication, expression and performance. The contextual approach shares some features with the functional approach. Similar to the functional approach, it focuses on functions of folklore in a socio-cultural setting in a society. It calls attention to the function of a folkloric form in its context of use. Thus, a folklorist searches for not only text but also context (Dorson, 1972; Finnegan, 1992).

In this approach, it is important to note who speaks a particular folkloric form, how it is spoken, to whom it is spoken and the response of the listener to that item. The notion that much of the meanings and functions of proverbs come from the contexts in which they are used, therefore, understanding the meaning and function of proverbs is possible when a context (situation) of folklore (proverb) is studied is the basis of the approach (Tadesse, 2004:33).

White (1987) observes that the contextual approach to the study of folklore underscores the interrelationship of context, meaning and function of a folkloric form. In other words, the contextual approach to the study of folklore emphasizes a description of a meaning and function of a particular folkloric text (e.g. a particular proverb) in specific context and then comes up to the identification of meaning and function of a folkloric form in a society in general.

## RESULTS

Below are alphabetical list of Oromo proverbs in which men and women are mentioned. Next to the list, the contextual meaning, philosophical underpinning and the narration behind the proverbs will be provided.

*Abbaan gindo 'o<sup>1</sup>; haati gingilcha'a.* (A father is like a vase while mother is like a sieve (tolerant).

*Abbaan Waaqa; haati lafa<sup>2</sup>* (Father is like god while mother is like earth).

*Akka dhudhuufaa baatettuu akka Harree boojitu beeke jette ta ilmi harree booji'ee itti gale* (I recognized that you were going to captivate donkey as you were farting when leaving home said a mother whose son captivated donkey)

*Beerti furdoo malee guddoo hin qabdu* (Women are fat, but not great).

<sup>1</sup> A flat basket made of *migira* (thick plaiting grass); it is used for storing locally-made bread (*biddeena*) after it is baked in the special clay bread pan called *eelee*; it is also an instrument for winnowing.

<sup>2</sup> The Oromo believe that *Waaqa* and *Lafa* (Earth) are inseparable. They consider the earth as their mother and their ultimate abode. They underscore that they suck the breast of the Earth as the baby sucks its mother's breast. All things originate from the Earth and depend on the resources of the Earth for their survival. For the Oromo, *Waaqa* is like a father. He gives them rain and helps the Earth grow different plants (Workneh, 2005:6).

*Cidha beerti feete aanan qodaa hin hanqatu* (When a woman has decided to go to wedding, her milk does not fall short of her milk holder).

*Dhadhaan fuula ibsa; dubartiin mana ibsiti* (Butter makes the face shining while women are in charge of beautifying home).

*Dhidhiibbaan toleef dhiirti hin dhalatu* (making convenient sexual intercourse cannot be a guarantee for giving birth to a son)

*Dhiira argaa hin quufan; argan quufan* (A good physical appearance of men does not assure his good sexual intercourse).

*Dhiirsi waa naa hin goone dhuufuun na ajjeese* (A useless husband assaulted me by his fart)

*Dubartii fi harreen dullaa jaalatti.* (Women, a dog and walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they be).

*Dubartiin deessuu malee beektuu hin qabdu.* (A woman may be fertile, but not intelligent).

*Dubartiin dhiira deessi malee dhiira hin geettu.* (A woman gives birth to a man, but she is not equal to him)

*Dubartiin faaya dhiiraati* ("A woman is a jewel of a man.")

*Dubartiin gaachana dhiiraati* ("A woman is a shield of a man.")

*Dubartiin lama hin beektu takka hin wollaaltu* (Women are best at one thing (women are good only at one thing; but not two).

*Dubartiin mala beekti; dhiirti mala akeekti* (men give hints while women are wise)

*Dubartiin yoo dhugaa kennaniif hin bootti* (Women weep when they are given justice)

*Haati harma guuti malee harka hin guutu.* (It is a mother's breast which weans, not her hands).

*Haati nama deessi; abbaan wadala harreeti.* (A mother is a child bearer; a father is simply a he-donkey).

*Haatiifi gabaan waan harkaa qabdu namaa kenniti.* (A mother and market offer (give) whatever they have).

*Haadhaa fi bishaan hamaa hin qaban* (Mother and water have no cruelty).

*Ibiddi dubartiin qabsiifte hin dhaamu* (A conflict aroused by women cannot be managed)

*Ijaaranii manaa keessa jirtaa namaa nagaa bultee jennaan; qabanni sibiilaa falakni si dhiiraa akkam bulte jette* (it seems like house and you seems woman said a man to woman who responded as 'you are carrying spear like man and your physical appearance seems man')<sup>3</sup>

*Jabaan gabbara haadhaa nyaata jennaan lafaan ka obboleettiituu dhaba jette jedhan* (the strong man takes his mother's bride wealth while the delicate man is denied the bride wealth of his sister)<sup>4</sup>

*Mootummaan dubartii karra cufaatt'oolcha* (the kingdom of women keep kraal closed throughout the day)

<sup>3</sup> This proverb has a genuine historical background. Once upon a time, a coward man has been asking a woman to enjoy love with her. However, he was not successful because she was not interested to satisfy his desire. One day, he met her lonely for all men in the village have marched to war to defend their land from enemy. This time, 'though you and your house are not counted as woman and residence respectively, how are you?' he said. She responded 'you are carrying spear like man and your physical appearance seems man; how are you anyways?' to criticize his presence around village while men are at war front which needs all men to take part.

<sup>4</sup> According to Arsi Oromo, *Gabbara* is cattle given to bride's brother as a form of bride wealth. However, it is not a custom to take bride wealth for ones' mother.

*Namni haadha qabu, nama Waaqa qabu.*  
(Having mother is equivalent to having God)

*Namni niitii hin qabne raasaadhaa galee yoo qe'eetti dhiyaatu na'a* (One who does not have a wife is unhappy any time he approaches his compound)

*Niitiin tee ilma deettee jennaan eennuun nama gootee jedhe jedhan namichi* (Is she consider me like human being said the husband to a man who asked 'have your wife gave birth to a son?')

*Abbaan muka alaati haati utubaa manaati* (A father is an outside tree while a mother is a pole of the house)

*Nyaanni soogidda malee, manni dubartii malee hin bareedu* (A house without a woman is like a diet without salt)

*Qalbiin beeraa akkuma harma ishee rarraati* (Women's mentality (thought) suspends just as their breasts hang in the air.

*Qalbiin Dubartii takka isiinuu dhungannaan harkaa baddi* (A woman has a single sense (mentality); and she loses it when one kissed)

*Sababaaf na dhaale<sup>5</sup> garamaaf na dhaane.* (he became my husband in pretext of levirate and beaten me for his belly)

*Ta qaawwa qabdu qaaqa hin dhabdu.* (One who have female genital is always troublesome)

*Ta ufii galab godhan dhiirsaa qalbiin godhan* (One has to solve his/her own problem in order to effectively solve others' problem)

*Ta ufiifuu hin bulle qondaallan bulchite* (A woman who could not feed herself

allowed the braves to spend a night at her house)<sup>6</sup>

*Ta worra moote gabayaa xixxe* (A woman, who dominates her family, despise all people at market)

*Ufiifuu mata galaa eessattiin ana gala jette ta mata galli fuudhe* ( He has no home of his own, where is he going to take me)<sup>7</sup>

The above proverbs, which other scholars categorize as proverbs showing women and men positively and negatively, have contexts in which they are used to validate thoughts. Some of them arouse from known historical facts and are directed to one individual (e.g: proverb no 3, 23 and 28.) Thus it is impossible to generalize these proverbs to all women and men. Some other proverbs portray complementarities of men and women.

## DISCUSSION

Many scholars have dedicated their work to Gadaa system of the Oromo which directs the life of the people in a holistic manner. Thus, democratic nature of the system has been extensively dealt with. Particularly, the philosophical underpinnings and institutions of Gadaa system are designed in a way that gender balance is kept in equilibrium. Asmerom (1973) poses the following reflection

<sup>6</sup> *Sanyoo* is institutionalized extramarital relationships of Oromo women. Men cannot deny this right and it is a sanctioned freedom to take lovers (Legesse, 1973: Bartels, 1983). Women prepare food and feed their *sanyoo* at the absence of their husbands. Women always prefer *qondaala* (a man with trophies to his name) to make their lover.

<sup>7</sup> According to Oromo custom, youths before getting engaged in marriage should make property of their own in order to be independent. *Mata gala* however is a person who lives in other person's house to make his living.

<sup>5</sup> It is a type of marriage in which the wife of a deceased husband is inherited by one of his brothers (Daniel, 2002).

regarding women's place in Gadaa political affairs:

...Nevertheless, among the Boran women do participate in political activities indirectly through their song called *karile*. In their song they use to criticize the poor decisions made by men. By doing so, they can force Gadaa leaders to alter any honorable decisions. Among other Oromo groups women are also represented independently through a tradition of *siiqqee* institution.

On the other hand, the *Dabballee* in Oromo Gadaa system are completely regarded as females which can be deduced from their physical appearance and the societies' perception towards them. They are socialized as females to reduce gender imbalance which is naturally inherent in males.

The *Dabballee* grow their hair long, usually at shoulder length, and decorate it with cowry shells. The style is typically feminine and is, in fact, identical with the hair style of a class of women whom the *dabballee* call their grandmothers. The boys are not only made to look like girls; they are also categorically identified with them. Borana always address them as girls (*intal*) when they want to attract their attention. If the strangers use the masculine pronoun in talking to them or about them, they are quickly corrected. The boys either go naked or they wrap a large shawl around themselves. This is another decidedly feminine characteristic (Legesse, 1973:52).

Ayehu et.al (2016) have also clearly demonstrated that men and women are equally treated in political, economic and social aspects of Gadaa system. According to these scholars, for example, women have parallel role in *gumaa* ritual. If they are not satisfied with what is going on in the community they protest against the wrongdoing organized under their institutions. *Itti Deemsisuu* (the act of

calling upon the entire multitude to punish wrongdoers) is organized when women are treated in an unjust manner. Women's utmost engagement in reproductive activities may have compromised their visibility in political and administrative chores. Contrasting to current bureaucratic responsibility which requires only intellectual viability, Gadaa governance has been innovated in a world in which physical potency was equally important. In the first place, Gadaa is all about commitment and community service. It is not about access to resources and power. Hence, a single Gadaa law that threatens the right of women cannot be mentioned in the history of Gadaa system. Nonetheless, individuals because of their individual interest might downgrade or thrash women. These acts however do not have legal backing. In line with this, such inhumane acts on women might be related to weakening of Gadaa system and emergence of autocratic systems. For instance, the Oromo saying "*Halaaliffoo nama nyaata; Amaariffoo nama dhaana* (he eats human like hyena and beats like the Amhara<sup>8</sup>) is used to explain the cruel acts of some husbands against their wives (Ayehu et.al, 2016).

Jeylan (2004) too depict the role of Gadaa system in maintaining gender balance. According to him, in areas where the Gada System is active, as in Borana and Guji, there have been forces of law governing gender and other relationships between members of the society. In areas where the Gada System is weakened, on the other hand, there are plenty of reflections of gender imbalance.

Likewise, the role of Gadaa system in keeping gender balance can be supported by the saying "*Gadaan laafnaan dubartii horanne*" meaning "we are able to control/administer women after the

<sup>8</sup> Autocratic governments who have been suppressing the community. The Oromo say 'Amhara' to mean formal government which was against the indigenous administration system.



weakening of Gadaa system”. This evidently shows that there are institutions working for women’s right in Gadaa system. Similarly, infiltration of Christianity and Islam in to the Oromo land has also relegated the status of women among the Oromo. These denominations evidently justify domination of men over women.

In the same fashion, it is repeatedly reported that women cannot air their view freely. Similarly, some writers have claimed that girls do not have any say in marriage arrangement. They are married to a groom who fulfills the criteria and interest of their parents (Daniel, 2002). According to Oromo philosophy, both abduction and *aseennaa*<sup>9</sup> do have significance for the community. *Aseennaa* is marriage type in which the girl leaves her family and joins a man on her own will. This is done without the awareness of the man and his family and they cannot reject the request. The same incident happens in case of abduction for a boy takes a girl without her willingness. In principle, the man forcefully marries the girl; practically however, there are instances in which women have awareness of the situation and facilitate the procedure (Beyene, 2006). This type of marriage is even preferred and initiated by women when situation forces them. There is one proverb which goes “*aseennaa natu dide; kennaa warratu dide; maal ta’a yoo na butani*” (“*Aseennaa* is not my interest; my parents are not searching husband for me; it is my pleasure if I am abducted” said a girl). This proverb clearly indicates the preference of abduction by women in certain situations. For example girls remaining unmarried are dishonored. In general, these two types of marriages complement each other and they keep equilibrium. As a result, this proverb is a viable tool to air their view in such situations.

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<sup>9</sup> marriage type initiated and arranged by only would-be wife

Similarly, the proverb which goes “*Ani ufij hin jennee, mucaan keessan ka hangafaa sun fuudha hin geennee? jette intalti mucaa kajeelte*” (It is not for myself; have your eldest son reached for marriage said a girl who desired a boy) also reveal the same fact. Hailu (2010) indicates that proverbs construct and perpetuate inequality between men and women in social community and the basic structures that convey non neutrality in oral literature. For him, proverbs exaggerate the weak side of women under the coverage of cultural ideology, and are used as cultural tools to convey the biased system for domination and oppression of women. Mind set and social set of new comers (generation) should be changed and proverbs can function as a means for such a revolutionary change which restores the honor and respect of women in our society.

Kerschen’s (1998) focusing on exposing some of the existing tensions in American proverbs about women purports that proverbs downgrading women have outlasted the circumstances that popularized them. Contrary to the above generalizations, Dundes (1965) has vividly put that we cannot censor and/stop folklore. The above assertion basically is a violation of anthropological and folkloric principles which urge researchers to understand the society instead of teaching them or censoring their knowledge. Ahmed (2010) on the other hand puts that images of women in Arsi Oromo folktales, folksongs and proverbs have been portrayed both positively and negatively and that images of women in all the three genres were highly distorted though some positive images also existed. However, the largest parts of the collected folktales, folksongs and proverbs have represented women in a negative and distorted manner. That is, some positive and negative representations of women exist only in the proverbs but not in the folktales and folksongs. In general, the overall result revealed that the deep-rooted attitude of the patriarchal society attempted

to establish the superiority of men and subordination of women in its oral literature

In the same move Berhanu (2005) concluded that verbal arts propagate, validate and maintain the prevailing gender system and the traditional gender based division of labor among the society. Macha Oromo use verbal arts to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behavior and to inculcate its values, norms and mores in the minds of its members. In many verbal arts, women seem to have been characterized to possess behaviors deemed inappropriate in the society and were made to suffer from the punishment, implying that they should conform to the norm so as to live peacefully and get acceptance in the community. Berhanu therefore urged the folk to change their attitude and perception towards women and abstain themselves from using verbal arts which are sexist and designed to distort women's image in the society in any way.

Qanbar Nada (2012) came across the same conclusion after studying Yemeni proverbs. For him too, women's image in the Yemeni proverbs has been found to have two sides: the negative side which occupies the major part, and the positive one which is marginal and extremely weak. He wrapped his study by stating that almost all proverbs degrade and devalue women and this negative image is deeply ingrained in the society and does not change with their age or social role.

Therefore, almost all the preceding scholarly works conclude that women are negatively portrayed in proverbs of all cultures and proverbs are weapon for women inferiority. The succeeding arguments therefore test whether this conclusion is valid for the Oromo or not. Jordan & de Caro (1986) in opposition to the above conclusion put that surveys of folklore texts or studies of particular items of folklore that are antiwoman are not without value, but they suffer from a weakness that has been a part of folklore

studies. Ignoring the cultural context in which those texts were written yields only limited knowledge about culture and cultural attitudes, especially when the texts may be chosen in a random and superficial way.

Finnegan (1970) also argue that "...the same proverb may often be used, according to the context, to suggest a variety of different truths, or different facts of the same truth, or even its opposite." Therefore, the production and interpretation of a proverb is a function of a complex interaction between macro aspects of social context (the broader societal and institutional background) and micro aspects of social context (the immediate contexts of utterance). No full understanding can be reached without some knowledge of the occasions and purposes of their actual use. To consider the myriad different occasions (and hence meanings) would manifestly be impossible-as a Fante elder put it, 'There is no proverb without the situation' (ibid).

Arewa and Dundes (1964) also stress the importance of studying the context and use of proverbs, "What are the rules governing who can use proverbs, or particular proverbs, and to who? Upon what occasions? In what places? With the presence or absence of whom? In many of the definitions formulated for proverbs, it is common to witness that proverbs are truth and they reflect reality of life. Here, the challenging question is 'how can two proverbs which seem opposite be true at the same time? In the following paragraphs, the researchers will try to address this exigent question.

Miruka (1994:36) and Dundes (1994:35) conceive a proverb as short, brief, obscure or gnomic statement expressing a supposed wisdom, truth or moral lesson. For them, proverbs contain folkwisdom, popularly accepted truth and are frequent in the day to day communication of people. Holman (1980) too asserts that proverb is the sentence or a

phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observations about practical life. Thus, one can understand that proverbs are true and every society validates them based on its practical life.

For Mieder (2004) there are proverbs for every imaginable context and they are thus as contradictory as life itself. But when the proper proverb is chosen for a particular situation, it is bound to fit perfectly and it becomes effective formulaic strategy of communication. Kerschen (1998) too put that for every proverb that promotes the submissiveness of women, there is another that admits that women will not always accept a subordinate position but will find a way around it.

As a result, we can undoubtedly find opposite proverbs in a given culture. The same thing is true for the Oromo proverbs. For example:

1. “*Manni utubaa hin qabnee fi manni dubartii hin qabne tokko* (A house without pole and a house without woman is the same)” VS “*dhiirri utubaa manaati*” (Males are pillar of house).
2. *Udaaniif dubartiin xiqqoo hin qabdu* (A feces and a woman (a girl) are never be little enough) versus *Dhiirri xiqqoo hin qabdu* (Men are never said little)
3. *Kan hanga ofii beektu dhiiraan maqoo hin teettu* (She who knows her level (status) would not sit beside a man) versus *dubartiin waaqa diqqoo* (Women are little god).
4. *Hantuunni boolla lama qabdu hin duutu* (A rat which have two holes won't die) versus *Saree mana lamaa nyaattu waraabessatu gidduutti nyaata* (A dog eating from two houses will be assailed by hyena)

In the first contradictory proverbs both men and women are depicted as pole of house. When these two proverbs come

together, it is logical enough to conclude that both men and women are equally important for one family among the Oromo. In case of the second pair proverbs, both men and women are claimed not to be simple. The third pair presents image of women in a completely opposite continuum. The first one depicts them as inferior to men while the second gaudily equate them with god. Coming to the fourth couple of proverbs, there are particular situations in which individuals are required to have a firm stand rather than being reluctant. Opposite to this, there are also circumstances in which one must devise a multiple of alternatives to withstand/ manage failures. Therefore, having two alternatives are encouraged and criticized in proverbs of the same people.

These paired proverbs which seem contradictory are complementary. Thus, in order to grasp gender understanding of the Oromo in a full-fledged manner, we have to carefully analyze such proverbs which seem contrary to each other. The other fact nullifying the arguments of those scholars who merely focus on some proverbs to conclude that women are subordinate is the reality that proverbs are directed to one individual. For instance, the proverbs we used above are not directed to all women; they are forwarded to a single woman who is believed to show such characteristics. Generally, one should know the reality that proverbs have two edged functions.

Thus all proverbs including the contradictory ones have their appropriate setting (time and place) in which they serve the society. That is why one should strictly consider the context which triggered usage of a given proverb. If we see the above proverbs at their face value, there are proverbs addressing women positively and negatively. In the same fashion, this leads us to the conclusion that women are respected and humiliated in a single society at the same time. However, this assertion is self defeating if scrutinized carefully. How

can we say that the same people have the philosophy of degrading and revering women at the same time? One of the claims should be fallacious which incite us to inspect social institutions of the people in relation to gender.

In the same move, scholars should be cautious of the fact that proverbs are directed to one individual who is believed to exhibit the behavior in a given context. Both man and woman can demonstrate weakness and strength. Thus, proverbs are directed to such individuals (either man or woman). Proverbs are not used to degrade/venerate men/women in a generalized manner. Rather, a single proverb is used for a single behavior, context and person. Thus, it is illogical to select a given proverb to conclude about men or women. In short, proverbs denigrating women have no institutional and philosophical backing in the Oromo.

## CONCLUSION

The Oromo are the storehouse of proverbs showing its philosophy, psychology, worldview, history and totality of its life. One can write ethnography of the Oromo by systematic and careful study of its proverbs. This however needs careful consideration of complicated nature of proverbs and wider institutional values of the people. Cultural researchers should also consider the wider worldview of a given society rather than isolating one genre and rendering conclusion or rushing to generalizations. Although the study is not claiming generalizability of the study beyond the Oromo people, it is the true reflection of the philosophy of the people studied. This calls for the reconsideration of the biased assumption that there are gender biased Oromo proverbs. They shall be considered as a means of freedom of expression for individuals. Its plausibility shall be based on contexts, justifications and wider institutions. Though Oromo proverbs are often regarded as a weapon for

women subordination and tool of patriarchy, other genres of folklore should also be critically investigated to test reliability of this assertion and get complete picture of Oromo philosophy.

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