

Let us not belittle Ethiopian Women's struggle

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Professor Al Mariam's (or Alemayehu Gebre Mariam's) article entitled...*The disquieting silence of our sisters*.....with sentences like “the deafening silence of her sisters..... the untapped power of Ethiopian women, ‘the new Ethiopian woman...shoulder to shoulder suffering the blows of dictatorship..”, belittle the struggle of Ethiopian women and their contribution up to now. The article could be a good lesson on how not to write about things one is completely ignorant about. I am tempted to ask, what do you know about women's struggle in Ethiopia? Have you studied their history, have you even surfed to check on Ethiopian women's websites? Did you really look for them?

The Iran of today that you want to celebrate by contrasting with the reality in Ethiopia could safely be compared to Ethiopia's 2005 rigged elections and the repression that followed when the ethnic dictator faced the defiant massive votes and hopes that were raised once again. Our sisters, whose voices might have been suppressed like most men of their time right after the Red Terror and in the aftermath when Ethiopians fled their country massively, have had time to raise their voices and join the struggle when ethnic politics started destroying their country in the 90's. One could espouse a noble endeavor by encouraging both our sisters and brothers to get organized all over again and thus join the struggle in an active manner, instead of lording it over, and insulting them in catchy words.

The total disregard for past sacrifices, for the struggle of Ethiopian women is disheartening to say the least. History did not just start in 2005 or when Woizerit Bertukan got arrested even though a whole nation rose as one against dictatorship and ethnic division. The massive participation, the demand for a free and fair election, the end of submissiveness etc. are all outcomes of years of struggle for democracy and human rights. The deceptive cover story of the dictators, the demise of ethnic politics, all their endeavors for fooling donor countries and the rest of the world was exposed when a state of emergency was announced the very day they lost the election. The fact that the Weyane had to pretend at being democratic for so many years is a testimony to the fruits of the people's struggle and the political awareness that is prevailing today.

Where did the awareness and all the gains regarding political consciousness in Ethiopia come from? The rule of law, social justice, the respect of rights, freedom of opinion, the right to organize and take one's destiny into one's own hands, the demand for a free press, free elections were all raised by past struggles and whatever gain was gained is the fruit of that time first of all. The slogans poverty is not a crime, land to the tiller etc. are not only political slogans about human rights, but are a part and parcel of economic, political and social rights. In that struggle, thousands of women took part, young and old,

many were sacrificed, many wrote heroic chapters in the history of our people, many endured torture without breaking up or giving up to the fascist brutes, and the disappeared of that time and of the present still remain unaccounted for. Ethiopian women should be proud that many young women paid with their lives to stand for the most downtrodden and to pave the way for a better Ethiopia for all.

Ethiopian women have a long history of struggle that gave birth to their massive involvement and participation in recent times. These contemporary actions and many worthy pages of history do ignite incredible flash backs in those who knew them and were part of historical times. Many faces come to mind and many profiles could be and should be drawn, tales should be told from ancient history to the present at least. Many mothers had been imprisoned, tortured and humiliated refusing to give up their children or even for some going as far as voicing their opinion in public. Even during the rule of today's dictators some mothers had refused in public to participate in the masquerade of those who wanted to exploit their loss and grief by stating the fact that many of Ethiopia's children do not still have the right to come back home. Ethiopia has many unsung heroines and also famous ones known and celebrated for the valiant battles waged both in the cities and the countryside thus defying the belittling of the participation of Ethiopian women.

Instead of making shallow assessments, bombastic and empty statements concerning the *disquieting silence of our sisters* it would have been more interesting to try and learn about women's palpable contributions and their on going struggle. Words have weight and impact and should be used with care and concern. Do you Al or Aemyaheu even know their struggle before picking up the pen to chastise them? Be it in Iran, Ethiopia or in any other country, freedom and liberty have always been the results of the accumulated struggles of all those pioneers, forbearers and all those who paid dearly during the early years of darkness when very few dared to come forth to be counted. Where were you then? Where were we then? Some humility and soul searching are in order I'd say, and even a mea culpa, if need be, would have been more proper. Unless we realize the impact and significance of past sacrifices and what the price of freedom (of opinion, of the press, of movement, etc.) really is, we cannot really appreciate the past, evaluate the present or share a tangible vision based on one's own history.

For me, what comes to mind is a saying that was circulating when Obama the candidate was nominated: "Rosa Parks sat, so that Martin Luther King could walk, Martin walked so that Obama can run and Barack Obama run so that our children can fly". This is a good lesson for those who prefer to ignore, belittle or even at times condemn past struggles, in total denial about how social history and political struggle of a country are necessarily intimately related despite wishes to the contrary. The patriotic women who died fighting against Mussolini's invading army, the young intellectual women who were part of the struggle against the autocracy, the mass of women who said no to fascism and ethnic politics and became victims of State Terror, the Aberash Bertas, Shibres etc are all part of the continuing struggle of Ethiopian women.

I do not think that Iranian women themselves would have dared to state that theirs is “the 1st female led revolution in modern times”, because they know about the Argentinean mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, of the courageous Women in Black, about Rigoberta Menchú Tum and Guatemala women, the battles of Arundhati Roy with women in India for resources and land, to mention but a few of the world wide famous ones. Alemayehu exaggerates with the carelessness of the one who cares not for his words, alas. The struggle of Ethiopian women cannot be waged through imitation, copying, hopeful thinking and miracles, but through organized efforts and being proud of past heritages and learning from past struggles in their own country and sharing experiences with those who are dying for bread and roses in the world at large.

You have dared to pontificate endlessly, whereas you know little about the subject in question. No investigations no write to speak or write as they used to say in the past. Ethiopian women have struggled in the past and are still trying their very best. Passing ignorance as knowledge has become quite an art for quite a few of our intellectuals. Whereas they will never dare to hurl unlearned and empty phrases concerning other countries, they never even hesitate to scribble nonsense when it comes to their own country. You would have known better had you tried to make at least some modest research before typing your critical article. Even better, you would have learnt more by discovering that Iranians and Ethiopians have a history of mutual solidarity and struggle that goes back to the 70’s but you were not there nor did you try to learn about it. The world wide Ethiopian student’s federation and the confederation of Iranian students’ union carried out joint demonstrations, sit-ins, picketing embassies when intellectuals were being hanged under the Shah and fleeing the land under the Emperor and even managed to carry out hunger strikes together in Frankfurt and Paris during the Red Terror period.

Moreover, I would like to end by saying that I do understand the confusion about ideology and the right of everyone to have any opinion at all; it’s a fear that emanates from being of a country where dictatorship still prevails. But it’s frightening to see some of our compatriots shift to the left as soon as Obama comes to power and start re-positioning themselves by using words like racist right wingers, after having written too much nonsense about Ethiopian militants and have been known as staunch yet uninformed left bashers.

Please be modest and try to learn the history of your people, from our own contemporary political recent history and especially the valiant struggle of Ethiopian women instead of flaunting your phrases from afar and as a foreigner to it all.