



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Critical Reading of Marxists and  
Poststructuralists studies on the Participation of  
Women in Armed Struggle in Eritrea (1961-1991)**

A Research Paper presented by:

**Nebil Ahmed Kusmallah  
(Eritrea)**

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of  
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialisation:  
Women, Gender and Development  
(WGD)

Members of the examining committee:

Dr. Nahda Shehada (Supervisor)

Dr. Dubravka Zarkov (Reader)

The Hague, The Netherlands  
November, 2008

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***Inquiries:***

Postal address:       Institute of Social Studies  
                              P.O. Box 29776  
                              2502 LT The Hague  
                              The Netherlands

Location:               Kortenaerkade 12  
                              2518 AX The Hague  
                              The Netherlands

Telephone:             +31 70 426 0460

Fax:                     +31 70 426 0799

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## **Dedication**

In the memory of  
**Ahmed Kusmallah Mohamed**  
**(1940-2006)**

My father, best friend & an intellectual of his time

## **Acknowledgements**

Coming to ISS was a long way! thank God I made it. A debt of appreciation is owed to a lot of people who supported me in completing my studies at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and the research paper.

My special gratitude goes to my supervisor Dr. Nahda Shehada for her outstanding guidance and sharp intellectual insights; for pulling me through in times of stumble and confusion; and for always being there to comfort me in times of anxieties. I have immensely learned and benefited from her supervision.

I am also grateful to my second reader Dr. Dubravka Zarkov for curving this research paper right from the beginning to the final stage with her constructive suggestions and comments, and for always being open and welcoming.

Much appreciation is extended to my most-loved mother Huria Mohammed-Ali for her prayer which kept me safe and for encouraging me to look forward never back. My brother Uzadin Ahmed Kusmallah for standing on my side even in the most difficult moments in Sudan. A special thanks to Hanan Ali, Nuwara Ahmed Kusmallah, Negassi Kusmallah and Fatma Mohamed-Ali for their material and moral support and for all my brothers and sisters in Eritrea for their belief in me.

I also extend my gratitude to Khalid Mohamed, and Omer Ibrahim for helping me in the process of data collection. Dr. Victoria Bernal, Dr. Sandra Hale, and Dr. Adney Cross, Anwar Said, Michael Weldegorghis and Mebrahtu Tekilesion, Abdulahi Abdi Aden, Filmon Hando Handaro and Pedro Goulart, for spending their invaluable time in reading my draft and giving me vital comments.

Special thanks to wonderful friends in WGD specialisation at the ISS; Irene, Trudy, Endang and Ly for immensely benefiting from the fruitful discussions and brainstorming sessions we shared. Last, for Melat, Rediet, Kassa, Tegene, Zigiju, Sintayeu for being great friends and for making my stay in the Netherlands memorable.

Thank you all!

## **List of Acronyms**

BMA	British Military Administration
EDF	Eritrean Defence Force
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
IPRI	International Peace Research Institute
NDP	National Democratic Program
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students
RICE	Research and Information Centre on Eritrea
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
USSR	United Soviet Socialist Republic
WWII	World War Two
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union

## Abstract

*This research analyses the Marxists and Poststructuralists scholarship on the participation of women in the national liberation struggle in Eritrea during the period (1961-1991). The main interest is to investigate how concepts like women/gender, participation and emancipation have been conceptualised. In retrospect, a question was asked on how women's participation has been conceptualised by the two scholarships. In addition to how relevant is the conceptualisation of the two schools for the theorisation of women's participation in Eritrea? With an intention of achieving the objective of the thesis, to contribute to the literature or theorisation on women's participation in Eritrea through in-depth examination of writings. The study has found out the two scholarships differ in a number of ways while conceptualising women's participation in the national liberation struggle, Marxists take uniformity of women's identity, emphasis on national discourse and highlight on participation leading to emancipation trend. In contrast, Poststructuralist stress on diversity and unfixed women's identity, focus on lived-realities, and oppose to gendered conceptualisation. Despite their differences, both share commonality in securing women's wellbeing through enhanced participation.*



# 1. Introduction

This research first places the participation of women in the liberation struggle in Eritrea (1961-1991), as part of the global national liberation movements. It equally asserts that the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) as the sole liberation force which delivered the independence of the country under the internationally observed referendum in 1993. This research will look at selected literature of different periods dating from 1970s to 2000s. The majority of the texts belong to feminists or mainstream scholars such as historians. Nonetheless, in this research they are subsumed into two schools of thought as Marxists and Poststructuralists. However, subsuming or dividing them is not to stress on a 'one-side-fits-all' bases, more clearly, the division and discussion of the two scholarships will occur as a result of my analysis in the course rather than by simply on criteria-set bases.

The main interest of the research is to compare the conceptualisation made by the two schools. The research begins with an overview of an historical background of Eritrea leading to the process of women's participation in the national liberation struggle. Then, places the different theoretical foundation of the Marxist and Poststructuralists closer into an Eritrean context by defining them. It also discusses the theoretical critique of Poststructuralists to Marxists or vice-versa for socialist-modernist way of conceptualisation. In addition, it explores how most of the Marxists literature of 1970s and 1980s which portrayed the EPLF as the most 'progressive' revolutionary guerilla movement, by magnifying the agenda of women. Thus, any reforms brought by the EPLF in different realms of the society were highlighted using women's agenda, (Muller, 2005: 45).

In what follows, first, I will argue despite Poststructuralists emphasis on women's individuality, diversity or 'particularity,' they still face loopholes of assuming subjectivity, precisely on believing feminist movement would be part of 'decentered subjectivity,' (Foley 1990: 11). Second, I shall make a comparison between the two scholarships for instance, Marxists taking concepts like women/gender, participation, and emancipation for granted without considering that these concepts remained 'powerful global feminist analytical tools,' (Emmanuel, 2004:51). In contrast, Poststructuralist sources give a more theoretical space for taking diverse context using intersectional lenses or ways of conceptualising. So to say, the objective of the thesis is modest one. To contribute to the literature by alerting the reader in showing the complexity of these concepts. Also, halting a 'buzz use' of the concepts by showing the point of confluence and divergence of the two schools of thought by bringing the Eritrean case into glance.

Finally, using standpoint theory the research will show on how each theoretical claims made by Marxists or Poststructuralists is discursively and epistemologically attached. Since both schools belong to specific epistemological and discursive positions. Thus, a point will be made conceptualisation of the Marxists was greatly affected by the ideological and discursive outlooks of the EPLF.

## **1.1. Contextual Background**

Eritrea is one of Africa's youngest states. The state was formally established by an internationally supervised referendum in April 1993. It is a country located in the Horn of Africa, bordered on the East by the Red Sea, on the Southeast by Djibouti, on the West and North by Sudan, and on the South by Ethiopia. It is a relatively a small country; it covers a total area of 124,323 square kilometres, with 354 islands and archipelago and has a population of 3.5 million inhabitants (UNECA, 2006).<sup>1</sup> The strategic location of Eritrea in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, has led to be the centre of political war for about 500 years by foreign forces.

During the 16th century Eritrea was under Ottoman control, while from 1865 onwards it became a province of Egypt. The Italians took-over in 1882 and on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1890 it became an official Italian colony along Somalia and Libya. In 1941 after Italy surrendered in WWII, Eritrea was placed under British Military Administration (BMA), and later the UN passed a resolution to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952 under the stipulation of the resolution 390A(V). The UN resolution even if it was against the desire of the Eritrean people whose will was unconditional independence to some degree it has granted some democratic rights and autonomy, (Gebre-Medhin, 1989).

However, when the Federation was enacted, many of these rights begun to be eroded by Ethiopia. Later in 1960s, the Eritrean parliament was unilaterally dissolved and Eritrea was forcibly annexed by the Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia in 1962. Non-violent resistance was there from the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) side. But later before the official abrogation of the Federation and then annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia as its 14<sup>th</sup> province, the armed resistance was in motion. This marked the beginning of armed struggle in Eritrea<sup>2</sup> by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) affiliated 'more to left-wing movement.'<sup>3</sup> Later a dissident group emerged, the EPLF during 1970s more leaned to Marxist and egalitarian

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uneca.org/search.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uneca.org/search.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Dawit Mesfin (2003), *Interview with Dr. Yohannes Zeremariam*, October 2008, available online: [http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article\\_2538.shtml](http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_2538.shtml)

values having a clear stand against ‘gender, religion, or ethnic bias,’ (Pool, 2001: 36-37); (Fekadu, 2007).

Accordingly, the EPLF developed one of the “most enlightened views” towards women participation and involving women in various activities of the front including in combat units, (Hale, 2001: 155). Women’s participation under the direction of the EPLF had its origin in the ideological and political stands of the Marxists and Socialist orientations. “...women have to participate in the struggle which was supposed to bring a socialist mode of production that would resolve class oppression in turn would abolish other social inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, religion,” (Worku, 1994: 6).

From this it can be deduced, Marxists saw women emancipation as part for class-emancipation. In other way, class emancipation is first – a base for all other liberation (or even; as a substituting all other liberations/emancipations) and for that reason, the EPLF was not different in the scene.

Having established the historical background of the national liberation struggle in Eritrea and the contextual background of women’s participation within the front (which will be addressed more in-depth from conceptualisation perspective in later sections of the thesis), I now turn to how the participation of women in militancy have been theorised in global scholarships and discourses of war by linking it to an Eritrean context.

Globally, many other studies can be cited on the existence of national independent movements in Africa or elsewhere since early 1950s, (IPRI: 2007). The Mau Mau in Kenya and the Algerian war of independence movements, followed by Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Palestine, Tamil of Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, Eritrea, and Tigray in Ethiopia, (IPRI 2007:1). As far as the relation between nationalist movements and their agenda of participation and emancipation of women is concerned, many scholarships tend to highlight the process that involves agenda of emancipation vis-à-vis male-centred nationalism, (Odejide, 2002).

Here, it is worthwhile to note women have played pivotal roles in the ‘political and productive’ roles in the national movement. Their involvement in the liberation struggles not only broke-down the domestic ‘responsibilities’ and ‘roles’ but also moved them into male-dominated ‘sphere.’ Furthermore, theorisation of participation of women examines and brings the ‘hierarchically gendered entries’ into the sphere. This gives multiple entries to the ‘deconstruction’ of the so-called ‘giventh’ role that - military is male-domain by challenging

it with new productive paradigm of examining gendered roles of women fighters, (Odejide, 2002).

For instance, in Eritrea women played a pivotal role in the participation in one of the ‘protracted conflicts’ of the twentieth century, (Hale, 2001:155). They have participated ‘fully, not partially,’ (Worku, 1994: 2); (Wilson, 1991). This trend is in opposition to the usual ‘history of militaries’ where women are used selectively and typically in jobs seen as extension of their domestic labour, (Hale, 2001:155). Furthermore, the following six ‘series of generalisations’ on women’s participation are useful to understand the contextual background of Eritrean society generally and the EPLF particularly, (Hale, 2001). They will help me later in narrowing down the analysis of the two scholarships.

1. Eritrean society as conservative towards ‘position’ and ‘participation’ of women;
2. EPLF developed a positive view towards women;
3. EPLF as Marxist-oriented guerrilla movement- “secular multi-ethnic vanguard” party;
4. Women under EPLF participated fully not as substitutes, as full fledged citizens of revolutionary movement eventually making 30 percent of the fighting forces and by serving in all capacities;
5. National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was a highly developed organization instrumental in crafting women’s agenda during the military struggle which balanced and forced to lay a leading role upon liberation;
6. Women experienced a high degree of “emancipation” while “in the field”- obtained all benefits of new socio-political identity; (Hale 2001: 1).

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

The theoretical conceptualisation of different authors belonging to Marxist or Poststructuralist schools in dealing with concepts like women/gender, participation and emancipation have been diverse indeed. As far as the researcher’s knowledge is concerned, except few theoretical queries such as the works of Victoria Bernal (2000 & 2001) no substantial contributions have been made in the area.

As Bernal (2000) pointed, the theoretical dimension still remains widely unexplored, and my contribution would be to fill the gap that exists in the literature. My contribution will be different from that of Bernal for I will bring-in the two schools into glance with specific concepts that are much more relevant for feminist theorisation nowadays. This will help to make it easier for any reader interested in Eritrea or in the involvement of women in the

national liberation struggle movements, to see how the two schools (Marxists and Poststructuralists) reflect on women's participation under the leadership of the EPLF. It is also worthwhile to highlight that my choices of the two schools of thought stems from my own recognition that even though they intellectually value the conceptualisation of women's participation both had minor impact on the lived-experience to women themselves.

### **1.3. Research Objectives and Questions**

The objective of this research is to contribute to the literature on the participation of Eritrean women in armed struggle through in-depth examination of writings of the two schools Marxists and Poststructuralist.

This research will be guided by the following questions:

- How is the participation of Eritrean women in the Struggle for Independence conceptualised by the two schools of thought (Marxists and Poststructuralists)?
- To what extent are the conceptualisations on women's participation of the two schools of thought (Marxists and Poststructuralists) similar or different?

### **1.4. Methodology and Analytical framework**

#### **1.4.1. The Method**

The research aims to use discourse analysis to explore the scholarship of the two schools of thought by examining how differently the concepts were used. To so it is vital in the first place to define discourse. Gasper and Apthorpe, (1996a) quoting from (Hajer 1993:45) define discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena. Discourses frame certain problems; that is to say, they distinguish some aspect of situation rather than other” (1996: 1). Furthermore, as the underlying principle of using discourse for “...it is a comprehensive tool for examining the meanings underlying the actions and statements of various actors as well as the institutions and structures of which they are a part,” (Shehada, 1999: 18).

While Shehada quoting from (Weedon 1989:115) notes, discourse analysis in relation to Foucauldian sense “seeks to explain the relations and forces of power from the discursive evidence available. It is a version centrally concerned with the social interests inherent in particular ways of governing subjects and, as such, has important political implications for the present,” (1999:15). Thus, discourse is much relevant for it helps to analyse the relations between meanings that exist in different structure and power element embedded to it.

### **1.4.2. The Data**

Books, articles, and report/policy papers are used to examine how different schools of thought have been dealing with different concepts. Even if some of the writings were not available within the researcher's domain at some point in time, meticulous selections has been made to conceptually frame and analyse them. The texts under analysis are: Amrit Wilson (1991); Asgedet Stefanos (1999); Basil Davidson *et al* (1981); David Pool (2001); Sandra Hale (2001); Tanja Muller (2005); Tekeste Fekadu (2007/8); Tesfa Gebremedhin (2002); Victoria Bernal (2001); Worku Zerai (1994); EPLF's Policy on Women in (Worku 1994); EPLF's NDP in (Wilson 1991).

### **1.4.3. The Analytical Framework**

From the onset, it is significant to note the difficulty encountered while categorizing the afore mentioned texts and documents in either side. This was evenly true for the scholars and various program paper of the front that have openly aligned itself into Marxist camp. Hence, the researcher is quite aware about the risk of labeling and framing scholars in somewhat a 'contrived framework' without their permission.

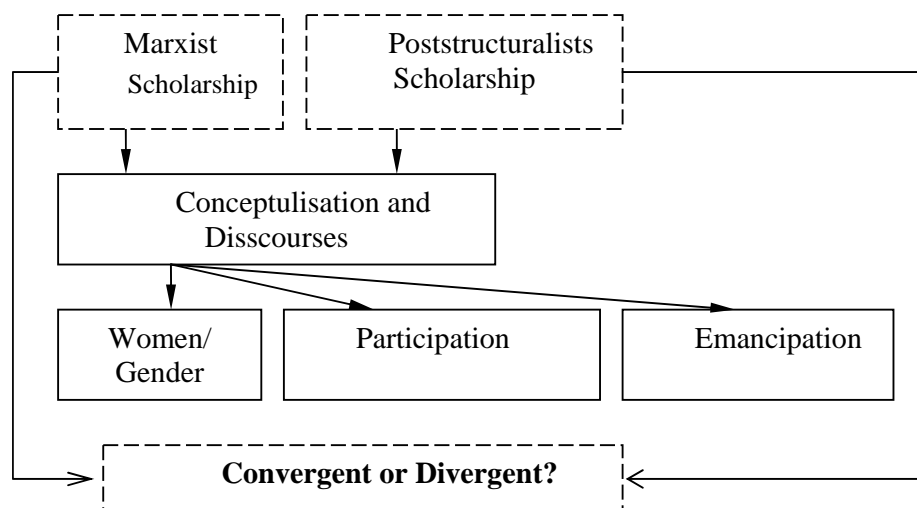
Nonetheless, the division has been made for the purpose of structuring and making comparative analysis between the schools in the discussion. This goes in-line with feminists' argument which tends to vary in terms of classifying works of others, because of different theoretical affiliations and self-definitions. Thus, making a clear-cut 'demarcation' in this instance proved to be a much more difficult affair, (Gemenez, 2000:2). Next, taking the argumentation of Poststructuralists against the monolithic grouping of the women which is basically essentialising; I argue in order with Stormhoj's postulation, category still plays a significant role having theoretical relevance, (2000: 10). Therefore, in relation to categorisation and comparison, some parameters stated-under will be used to observe the duality of the two schools.

But, before outlining the parameter of making comparative analysis between Marxists and Poststructuralists some important questions were asked by footing on Divora Yanow's category analysis. According to Yanow, categories help us to have a clear 'question and answer' and also delineate what similarity or difference is there within features in comparison, (2000: 49). In plain definition category "... constitute sets which share the features with respect to which their elements are the same and different," (Yanow, 2000: 50-51).

In similar vein, Barbara Foley's piece (1990: 2-5) which enlists many points on how Marxists would answer to the critique of their counterparts, i.e., Poststructuralists was also helpful to set the features of comparative analysis. Applying two of her observation on Marxist totalising nature to the concept of 'class' and Poststructuralist disputation to unified identity of 'women'. Both, Yanow's model of category analysis and Foley's critical reflection on the two schools will broadly help to make the comparative parameters explicit by classifying texts or authors under analysis to either scholarship.

- First, the element of conceptualising of class analysis was taken as one feature while probing, (Foley, 1990: 4). Broadly speaking, for Poststructuralists class is 'subtly racist and sexist', (Gemenez, 1975:7). While Marxists have theoretically claimed that women's issue could not be fully understood in isolation from 'structures and mode of production,' (Foley, 1990: 4). Thus, authors who fail to juxtapose class with several other elements of oppression such as race, age, sexuality or gender etc. were taken in one box of identifying them as Marxists.
- Second, while grouping authors who put their stand tacitly to put them in either side several questions were asked: do Marxists have different meaning in category of identifying themselves? What do Marxists or Poststructuralists have in common while conceptualising women's participation? On what ground do Marxists argue conceptualising class is a stepping-stone to overcome women's oppression. While for Poststructuralists, why are they attempting to come up with non-unified and unfixed version to the concept of women? With other forms of oppression in letting 'cultural and symbolic' entities emerge in the process was taken as another box of identifying Poststructuralist authors, (Synder, 2008: 188) ;( FE, 2000: 93).
- Final feature of category was using a point, asking from which point of views does each discourse/school implicitly come? In answering Marxists argue on women's uniformity by rooting themselves from solving a structured society while Poststructuralists on diversity for taking the concept of women without centre to be properly 'conceived, defined and understood,' (Stormhoj, 2000:12).

Diagram 1: A roadmap to theorisation of concepts and the two scholarships.



Source: *own illustration*

The above figure shows the analytical framework which will be used in this study. The purpose is to see how the different scholarships utilised the drawn concepts differently and how the concepts are interlinked to one another and how they will be distilled by applying intersectional conceptualisation using discourse analysis as a method. Another point worth mentioning is the chosen will equally affect my analytical framework on how I think about them. In fact, discourse analysis will be more method of analysis than theoretical or conceptual frameworks.

Moreover, for conceptual clarity feminist literature definitions to the concepts have been taken, “emancipation... a belief that the position of women can change within the existing framework of society, where theories of women’s liberation involve transforming the social framework itself,” (FE, 2000: 61) more inclined to the advocacy of first-wave feminists. Gender is also defined in terms of power-laden and socially constructed, “as a primary way of signifying relations of power” which is by no means fixed rather ‘socially constructed’, (Scott, 1999:44). Also, my definition to the concept of participation can be summed: participation is not a value-free concept, it is discursively and historically constructed and may mean differently for different group of women especially for women participants in the national liberation movements, (Muller, 2005:45).

I will use the afore-stated definitions because they go in-line with my own reflections and suits to my research questions. Hence, drawing from the broad and conventionally most accepted definitions of the concepts will help in exploring the analysis of the conceptualisation the two schools have made. This will help me to be relevant to how I will



see, comprehend and analyse the work of others. To put a sum, the concepts will be analysed in terms of how different authors have been dealing with them, but to operationalise that the two schools have been categorically labelled as Marxist and Poststructuralists. In all instances scholars belonging to nationalists and non-nationalists have been taken into consideration. To see how these authors have analysed those concepts by understanding their conceptual frameworks and assumptions.

## **1.5. Justification and Relevance**

The intellectual debate between Marxists and Poststructuralists has been a subject of enormous discussion and deliberation throughout the last quarter of a century. The two schools have been either advocated or opposed by different feminists or other mainstream scholars belonging to either camp.

The research is in-line with the founding objectives of Women Gender and Development (WGD) specialisation at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) - to equip students with 'theoretical tools and skills' in analysing 'ideologies' and conceptualisation. For the given reason, bringing the case of full women's participation in the national liberation struggle in Eritrea and anchoring it with the research question of the conceptualisation made by the two schools makes the topic worthwhile.

On top of my own fascination about the contribution of Eritrean women in the liberation struggle along their male counterparts. I am an Eritrean, in some way or another has been affected by the war.

## **1.6. Scope and Limitations**

Given the priority of examining different scholarly works that engaged/theorised and conceptualised women's participation. The choices of these reading were limited by my ability to access the literature inside Eritrea and the longer time I spent in tracing the data in the Netherlands, and for some I have to wait to be mailed to me from Eritrea.

This research does not claim it has covered all the literatures that dealt with the participation of women in armed struggle, nor it is a comprehensive study of the entire literatures existed at that times. To tackle this problem, it has used different publication from different time-line to show the diversity of the choice. Since, the two schools appeared in different times, Marxists who became much more influential during 1970s and 1980s dominating feminist nationalist studies, and it became strong in Eritrea because it was a

leading discourse of the EPLF, while the same is globally true for Poststructuralists during the mid-1980s and 1990s onwards.

Therefore, researcher is aware that the Eritrean profile is not widely different from other national liberation movements, where different members of the society were mobilised (including women) to strive for a common goal. Diverse identities are lamed into the national question usually under the leadership of one nationalist movement, so was the EPLF in the Eritrean case. Moreover, in comparing the two schools it is not my intention to draw any structural or historical parallels but to analyse the concepts drawn as a result. Finally, tracing different scholarships or discourses which stretched in different periods and circumstances of 1970s, 1980s, and 2000s was a very difficult task as discourses change in time and space/context.

### **1.7. Organisation of the paper**

The chapter breakdown of the research will be as follow: the first chapter will commence by briefly outlining the historical setting which lead for the participation of women in the liberation struggle in Eritrea. Chapter two will make a thorough literature review on the theme of the research in terms of global and local context of women and militancy, pinpointing the implication it had on Eritrean context. Chapter three will shed light on the presentation of frame of analysis and assumptions of the authors who approached women's participation under the EPLF. This will be done by analysing the two scholarships and by making a comparative analysis. Chapter four will analyse the researcher's reflective observation on the conceptualisation and discourses (the similarities and differences), the epistemic position and assumptions of various authors in regard to the two. The paper will windup with chapter five by concluding and stipulating points of divergence and convergence of the two schools.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Concepts: definitions, foci and relevance**

#### **2.1.1. Marxists**

The link between Marxism and feminism is full of ‘difficulty and contradiction’ (Feminist Encyclopaedia (FE), 2000:321). Marxist analysis is based on ‘class analysis and labour production.’ Whilst, Feminist analysis goes beyond this by challenging the class and labour dynamics both theoretically and practically and in broader scholarly ‘discipline’ and ‘social movements’. Although both share many common aspects, the attempt to reconcile them have proven to be of little success, (FE, 2000:331); “...actual attempts to form what could loosely be called a theoretical alliance between Marxist and feminist theory have met with limited successes,” (FE, 2000: 321); (Foley, 1990:5).

Considered as a further development of Marxist-Leninist theory, Marxist feminism focuses on the women’s question and explains the position of women in the over-all society. As indicated it was developed as a result of women’s mobilisation with different ideological setting in different parts of the world, (Mavivi, 1989: 15-16).

Mavivi writes, some Socialist feminists emphasis “...sexual division of labour, the theory of women or gender and interests, needs, issues or demands, to understand the concept of class as it affects women in society,” (1989: 20). This has led to identification of both men and women as part and parcel of working class, “women worker’s understanding of class members contains deep material division between two sexes. Material division are manifested in the formations of organization of various workers,” (Mavivi, 1989: 20).

According to Young *et al* the sexual division of labour can be defined as “system, of allocating particular tasks to men and other to women,” (Mavivi, 1989: 10); (FE, 2000: 321). Similarly, women’s emancipation is not only used by Marxists or Socialist feminists, but often by second wave feminists as well. Mavivi further explores, concepts like emancipation, women’s liberation and feminism employ various “resistance, and questions of theory, strategy and tactics to address the women’s question, which assumes different forms in different countries, and within a country itself,” (1989: 46). Thus, Marxists focus more on class and production dynamics related to structure, and feminist Marxists arose as a result of such critique to the classical approach of Marxists. More often they use central concepts like division of labour, emancipation and liberation.

### **2.1.2. Poststructuralists**

Poststructuralists came as a drastic theory of “meaning and assumption about subjectivity found in structural linguistics,” (FE, 2000: 397). Accordingly, Poststructuralists in the process have confronted with the fundamental assumption about ‘knowledge, subjectivity and power’ in the western thoughts. Feminist Poststructuralists have developed critique of identifying the non-presence of feminine ‘body’ in the western thoughts, (FE, 2000: 397).

The ‘theory of discourse’ is central for Poststructuralists. For them discourses are “networks of often conflicting institutionally based discursive practices which constitute discursive field such as medicine, the law and sexuality. Again, Poststructuralists “constitute subjectivity for the individuals who are their subjects and agents,” (FE, 2000: 397); (Weedon, 1999: 99).

Some Feminist theorist’s drawing from the works of Foucault claim, Poststructuralists make emphasis that biases are ‘discursively’ built and ‘gendered difference’ need to be problematised, (Afray, 2007:1); (FE, 2000: 397). Yet, as Synder notes Poststructuralists are not free from critiques on too much emphasis on ‘identity politics’ on individuals rather than on the bigger context, (2008: 187). Scott comments, Poststructuralists happen to be ‘instructive’ but tend “not to permit the introduction of a notion of historical specificity and variability,” (1989: 38). To add more, deconstruction is significant component as a model Cornell (1991) quoted in FE explains: ‘equality of men and women does not prescribe within the confines of andocentric society without having to rely on an essentialist feminine ethics of mothering or caring,’ (Stormhoj, 2000:8); (FE, 2000: 130). Thus, Poststructuralists arouse as a radical theory, it gives more emphasis to theory of discourse, deconstruction and on differential and gendered differences.

The research at this stage will only set the conceptual definitions of the two schools of thought without deeply probing their theoretical differences on the conceptualisation and their links with the research finding. Making conceptual and definitional clarity will be more useful to ‘fore-ground’ the concepts while dealing with women’s participation in the national liberation struggle in Eritrea under the leadership of the EPLF.

### **2.2. Women and Militancy: an overview**

This part presents a contextual setting on ‘women and militancy’ globally by shedding more light on the Eritrean context - which happened to be guerrilla national movement. It outlines the different perspectives of theorising women’s participation put-across as Marxists

and Poststructuralists. It will analyse the perspectives of feminist Marxists, who also happen to be feminist nationalists. I have mainly chosen them because of my initial prognosis that their perspective is much universalising and gendered in dealing with concept like participation emancipation and women/gender. The features of these perspectives on women and militancy will be explored in the subsequent sections.

Early literatures on nationalism, war and conflict have portrayed women merely as victims or by simply paying no attention to the 'gendered experience,' (Moser and Clark 2001). In nationalism and military studies, despite enormous literature on nationalism, there are comparatively few 'methodical' attempts to analyse women's participation in these nationalist causes, (Kandiyoti, 1998:1). Again, in spite of explaining nationalism in different aspects, the "gender dimension" of nationalism and national identity has been neglected by "mainstream theories," (Toktas, 2002:2).

Yet, while women are significant agents who played significant role in opening-up and creating 'theoretical space,' the position has been widely marginalised, (Kandiyoti, 2001: 11). Excerpts similar to that of Kandiyoti's indicate that the study of women, nationalism and militarism, specifically the involvement of women as full-flagged combats in different national movements has been sidelined for long in the academia. However, it is important to note during 1990s there was an explosion of literature on studying women's participation in the realms of nationalism and liberation struggle movements.

An interpretation similar to that is Sandi Cooper's analysis on women's role and participation in the public service created during the US Civil War. She makes more emphasis on the aftermath situation when the era of revolution is at dusk. Subsequently, argued "...by and large, most of the research and literature on the topic can be roughly grouped in three categories," (2005:169).

The first is a view shared by Proctor *et al* which is deeply entrenched in the societal impediments and challenges of the national movements and discourses. Bringing a particular conclusion: in order for women to know what constituted active citizenship their participation in war time is essential. Nonetheless, questioning the territory of what kind of participation is sought and in what way is still ambiguous. Her own paradox is contemplated as for men 'soldiering' is an accepted sacrifice and duty "for women, the message is much more mixed," (Proctor *et al*, 2005:169).

Second, a view is shared by Shultz (2002) and Toktas (2002), for in stance Toktas in her article *Women and the Military Nationalism, Militarism and gender politics: women in the military* quoting from Wilson (1994); Yuval Davis; (1997) states: though nationalism

functions under masculine apparatus, paradoxically nation is feminised like the image of 'motherland'. However, using the same discourses that have glorified them, is also defining them through domesticity, and it is in this circumstances that Toktas argument rest, by simply questioning the paradox.

Third, a view shared by Mats Utas *et al* with an aim of collapsing the often gendered opposition of *agency* and *victimhood* that typically characterises "...the analysis of women's coping strategies in war-zone". This is manifested by an elaborate alignment behind the concepts of 'strategic' and 'tactical' agency, (2004: 403). According to the summation made by Armstrong and Prashad: "war has never been men's work. Women are always part of wars. Women fight and die in wars. Women protest and resist wars. Nothing is predictable, however, about how women enter war, or how war enters them," (2005:213).

### **2.3. Women in National Liberation Movements**

In terms of broad themes, a 'substantial number of women soldiers have given their lives in wars through out the century', "...women [sic.] have always and everywhere [have] been inextricably involved in war, [but] hidden from history... during wars, women are ubiquitous and highly visible; when wars are over and the war songs are sung, women disappear," (Goldstein 1998: 59).

But, only recently their role was recognised. This was sparked by feminist scholarship's interest "in uncovering the previously ignored roles of women in social and political history," (Goldstein, 1998: 59). Historically, guerrilla warfare provides us a rich source of data on mixed-gender combatants. Goldstein indicates on this "...scholars have illuminated women's crucial roles in a variety of wars, including in Vietnam, South Africa, Argentina, Cyprus, Iran, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Israel, Nicaragua, and others," (1998: 77-78).

Nonetheless, much type of these literatures lacks concrete analysis of the dynamics of women's visibility. As if making women's voice 'visible' and 'ubiquitous' is a resolution or panacea of the whole story to address the complex nature of women's participation. At the same time, it will not to give clear answer to how concepts such as 'participation' and 'emancipation' were crystallised in the national movements and wars for that matter.

The most notable among the WWII women involvement were those of Yugoslavia where 'centuries of tradition allowed some role for women as fighter,' (Goldstein, 1998:77-78). Also the 'Vietnamese communists war against the French and American share' several features

with the WWII Yugoslavia case – a communist-led “people war” in a country with some tradition of women warriors, (1998: 79).

Nicaragua shared a similar scenario with the other communist national guerrilla movements, the Sandinista army women made up one-third of the total force. They were typically attracted to it because they were admonished for their bravery and for being ‘at the forefront of the battlefield’. Added with the movement timing where it grew up when the feminist era was at its pinnacle. Also the movement has strong women’s organization for further motivation, (1998: 81).

In Africa, women guerrillas also have ‘fought and then been pushed aside’, for example, “4, 000 women combatants made up 6 percent of ZANLA - Zimbabwe forces,” (1998: 82). Similarly in Sri Lanka women apparently constitute about ‘one-third of the rebel Tamil Tigers force of 15,000 fighters, and participate fully in both suicide bombing’ and other combat activities<sup>4</sup>, (Goldstein, 1998: 82).

## **2.4. The Case of Eritrea**

Accounts from IPRI indicate, women fighters have been very important ‘symbol’ of resilience and sacrifice especially in Eritrea under the guidance of the EPLF, with similar stand like that of socialist Yugoslavia, (Goldstein, 1998: 82).

According to Weldeghiorghis, at the beginning the EPLF did not realise the advantages of putting women in the national liberation army “...in the first decade the revolution [armed struggle] did not have a vision of a comprehensive change to encompass women’s participation; nor did it has an integrated strategy to achieve it stated goal, i.e., independence,” (2007: 98). He adds, “the involvement of women in the armed struggle was accidental and without a prologue or plan. In 1967 young women joined the fighting units of the Third Military Region of the ELF. This event became strange phenomenon in an entirely male organization”, (Weldeghiorghis, 2007: 98).

I disagree with Weldeghiorghis when it comes to the term ‘accidental’ for it rules-out the whole argument of the EPLF’s relentless effort to mobilise the entire society (including women) to combat out-numbering ‘enemy’. For me this has little to do with ideology or political stand the EPLF because it was a matter of defending oneself or more related to survival value.

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<sup>4</sup> As one historian puts it: ‘indeed, so noteworthy was women’s courage ... that women Partisans performed more bravely than men’ (Goldstein, 1998). Here the research will partly probe the different assumptions of different authors about “what is bravery” and “who is more brave” from gender perspective.

Also similar claim is made by the EPLF itself, like other national movements the number of women participants obviously tends to be exaggerated. In this case, women made about 'one-third of the fighting force' at one time reaching 100,000 according to Weldeghiorghis, (2007:98). It is also worth to note, Hale and others who watched the Eritrean case closely give us a special account about the it, with special interest of women fought in one of the 'protracted war' in the twentieth century. And the interesting development it followed during post-liberation eras with different roles and influences.

All in all, according to Hale such probing will also provide us to have a 'theoretical opportunity' to highlight "the difference between egalitarian gender relations during a conflict and the conditions for women in civilian life; for example, women's transition from the status of "fighter" civilian (or demobilized fighter)," (Hale 2001: 155).

Another is the controversy involving, "while the combatants and other "fighters" in the liberated zones envisioned and carried out transformation in economic, political, class, ethnic, and gender relations, the rest of non-combatant society held in the present cultural practices and behaviours?" (Hale, 2001:157).

This is an interesting point to uncover, because civilians were needed in non-liberated areas to help in war activity by secretly mobilising them. In order to win the civilian mass the front basically brought strategies of ironically praising 'family and individual life' by acclaiming women as "mothers and as both protectors and socialisers of traditional mores". In other words, acclaiming private life would mean the 'control of women's sexuality' and by gaining mass support which happen to go hand-in-hand with earlier generalisation made about Eritrean society earlier, (Hale, 2001: 158).

Worku (1994: 18-19) from the perspective of national discourse unveils: women participated to be 'dressed in military uniform and to carry guns and walk in line with men'; 'to escape an arranged marriage'; to 'escape the first-night of their marriage' or something in the 'society, culture, history' motivated them to naturally join, (1994: 19). Nonetheless, such argumentation need to be questioned because it is brings a logic changes in civilian life would entirely transform the women's lives, (Hale 2001: 156).

While the EPLF policies in the liberated zones are said to have changed the customary roles of women, most markedly in the shift from 'private' to 'public' sphere, (Wilson, 1991). Such statement made by Wilson is not substantially supported nor clear because it remained vague on who liberated from what or if the liberation was all encompassing one.

However, the reforms made by the EPLF were not without stiff opposition from men and women alike both in the liberated and non-liberated areas. As a result the EPLF was



strangled with a problem of maintaining balance between progressive change which were prevalent in the liberated areas, while keeping the popular support intact where 'women's position was associated with religion and culture,' (Pool, 2001:127-28).

Pool clarifies, the EPLF used strategies such as literacy programs, health and propaganda campaigns to keep the balance, (Pool, 2001:127). Muller makes a summation to this, women's participation within the EPLF from individual participant perspective 'might have meant' differently for different women. She also adds, women joined the struggle "came from very diverse backgrounds and thus brought with them a very different understanding about what emancipation might mean for them," (2005: 47).

In the final analysis, surveying the literature on the topic has been a vast and difficult part because of the recently growing significance of the study on women and militancy. As stated, the above section has briefly accessed the global perspectives and discourses of militancy and women with special attention to the Eritrean context. It also took onboard the perspectives of the two schools. Whereby Marxist literatures assert women's agenda did not reach a political mature stage until the EPLF came into the political arena of Eritrea during 1970s. Similarly, the claim happen to be enforced with the Marxist-Leninist orientations. However, Poststructuralists call upon sharp analysis on the lessons drawn especially from the situation ex-women fighters in the post-independence period. Typically exemplified by the quickly eroding women's gain in social life causing much more interpretation of these concepts on the lexical meaning that is routed on the discourse.

### 3. Scholarships and discourses: Marxists and Poststructuralists

The following section will go through in details the diverse ways of conceptualising women's participation by the EPLF using selected literature of specific authors. It sheds light on the disparity among these conceptualisations and the discourses drawn. It will also highlight on the limitations of some authors who tend to emphasis, typically on the 'national narrative' by excluding the others, (Mason, 2001:1). Finally, it discusses points of similarities and differences between Marxists and Poststructuralists conceptualisation from the drawn analysis.

The Eritrean national liberation struggle was composed of two "wars", a war by the EPLF and the other by the scholars, (Akinola, 2007: 52). Precisely enquiring which one was the main war "the battle for the hearts and minds of Eritreans were fought in the world at large as well as at home," (Akinola, 2007: 52). Thus, the intellectual battle fought by the scholars in different schools of thought - specifically on the conceptualisation of women's participation in the liberation struggle under the leadership of the EPLF is another 'war' worth-dealing with. In doing so, each scholar's background, discursive outlooks or affinity to a particular school or unifying discourse must be given a high priority.

#### 3.1. Legacies of the front<sup>5</sup>

Earlier politico-historical piece written during 1980s by Davidson, Cliffe and Gebere Selassie, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* coming more from Marxist school has dealt with concepts of participation and emancipation interchangeably. Such address was made through magnifying the EPLF's roles of providing women access to health, literacy or judiciary reforms in the liberated or non-liberated areas. The piece unveils:

We will deal here with the participation of Eritrean women in the liberation struggle, but briefly see how the transformation of the social structure of society that is taking place tries to bring about changes in the status of women" (Davidson *et al* , 1980: 108).

This line argumentation is related to Marxist motion socio-structural change in a society would be a basis to accomplish the structural change. Subsequently, changing the lives of women by the improvement of their status in the society. Moreover, they view the circumstance of women's participation in the liberation movements as a unique achievement by typically magnifying the EPLF as a 'revolutionary' and 'progressive' national movement.

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<sup>5</sup> Front at this instance is used to mean, Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), because most of the scholarly texts refer to as the front also it is widely used term in Eritrea to mean the EPLF.

In other words, participation of women is linked with the (ongoing) transformation in the society using presumption; participation would change the repressive situation women are encountering. However, they soften the link of explaining the meanings of ‘participation for different groups of women by occluding the question of ‘plurality’ in the identity of women. Thus, most of the claim is made using language of trial (not of certainty and confirmation).

Consequently, this kind of writing has been prone to stiff opposition from the side of Poststructuralists. Typical instance is Muller’s contention ‘most of the EPLF’s revolutionary character’ was often connected with the agenda of liberating women using Marxist ‘emancipation projects’ as their working tool, (2005: 45). Similar to that Manson (2002) and Bernal (2001) critique the superficiality of this trend by reflecting on the emancipation-gap between civilian and combatant women, and/or women in the liberated<sup>6</sup> or non-liberated<sup>7</sup> areas.

For Marxist sources, however, women’s greater participation is equated merely in terms of access on socio-economic gains, and legislative reforms. As Manson argues “... research examines the vital role of the EPLF in initiating gender-based reforms to alter land ownership, marriage and personal laws, political participation, education and health. “... more specifically, the literature is inclined to merely reiterate the dominant EPLF ideology,” (2001: 1). Here, my contention is similar to that of Manson’s observation embracing such claims which only took structural change and only singles the EPLF perspective in affirmative way onboard is rather questionable, (2001).

### **3.2. Access and common identity as ‘frame of analysis’**

As stated earlier, Davidson *et al* built their analysis increased political participation (including military participation) would solve all women’s problems by providing them access and structural reforms. Typical instances surfacing in the text can be found on access of women including: ‘land rights and reforms,’ inheritance laws and political and social participation. Excerpt, “now women are not only allowed to attend but actually to participate activities in the village assemblies and in all the social and political activities...women through their mass association have got access to the highest responsibilities in the organs of the self-government system,” (Davidson *et al*, 1980:108).

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<sup>6</sup> Liberated areas denote to the areas which were occupied by the EPLF or areas freed from the Ethiopian occupation.

<sup>7</sup> Non-Liberated areas hereby refer to the areas that are still under the Ethiopian control.

My exposition is that there seems women's participation at this instance has been equivalent with socialist project of justifying; women were fully brought to different activities and spheres – especially participation in employment, education and politics as underlying process of emancipation. Again, it is important to underscore, military participation was taken as part of the political – social participation (a proof of equality, so to say). This is manifested by the same authors' depiction of women fighters in the EPLF as:

Women fighters in the EPLF are also engaged in agriculture and in handicraft industries. They work in machine shops, electric shops, weapon's repair shops. Women fighters actively participate in military operations. In the EPLF, there is no work that is considered as being only for men. The Front also seeks to get the first priority to go to the Front's cadre school. At the First Congress the EPLF 11% of the delegates were women. One of the most active mass association of the Front is in fact the Women's association, (Davidson, *et al* 1980: 108).

Following this course of argument Davidson *et al* also state right from its inception the EPLF associated the whole national cause with the achievement of '*social liberation*' project. To an extent "... it meant profound changes in existing Eritrean Society... to obtain the total and conscious participation of the masses in the ongoing struggle," in addition people have to be "... organised, politicised and armed," (1980: 99). Such overt statements emanating from nationalist tone, makes a case women's participation in armed struggle is an empowering project of establishing social justice for all women in Eritrea.

However, this is not to deny that participation is one good element of women's empowerment and achievement, particularly Eritrean women have been mobilised and recruited along their male counterparts to fight for the same cause. As Tesfa explains "[Eritrean women] [have] sacrificed and tremendously and contributed much to the overall efforts to achieve national independence and emancipation of women," (2002:133). At this particular point, I am not claiming participation is disempowering. Nor to sound women should not participate at all for they possess different and fragmented identities. As it has been seen in Eritrea and elsewhere, in abnormal situations like war meaning of fragmented women's identities cutting-across many boundaries of age, class or gender etc. the effect proved to be remain very minimal.

But, what I am contending at is the linear trend of arguing women's participation in the national liberation struggle acted as deliverance for women's subordination in the society, basically there is no mature 'theoretical' explanation for women's subordination monolithically. Molyneux asserts "...women's oppression is recognized as being multi-causal in origin and mediated through a variety of different structures, mechanism, and levels which may vary considerably across space and time," (1986: 231).

Equally such views, also means women themselves are not assumed to have agency – because liberation is not a result of their own struggle (even if they are part of political/military movement) but a result of what the movement struggles for. However, this is not to reject that Marxists are among those who appreciate at least theoretically the agency of people. Also my disputation is also even if participation is highlighted; it does not clearly delineate the constituency of the participants, identity and degree of participation, plus for failing to recognise the heterogeneity nature of women's identity. For reasons of specificity different women might be affected differently as the result of their participation, (Moyneux, 1986: 232).

More on the text, other than Bereket, who is a native scholar (educated in the west),<sup>8</sup> both Davidson and Cliffe are western scholars. Basil Davidson, in accordance to other similar sources, he was able to 'break ground in the colonial study of Africa,'<sup>9</sup> and helped popularise interest in the field throughout the world. He authored many books in 'anti-colonial struggles in Africa'. The point to reveal is he makes ground-breaking research and contribution in one field but remain very mainstream in another - gender. By mainstream it is meant, uncritical toward gender issue without taking the complexity of gender roles, relations, responsibilities, between women participants and the front into consideration. This seemingly picks an argument promoted by the EPLF's ideological card of liberating women by saving them from the repressive they were experiencing.

Going through Davidson *et al* piece, it seems to apply concept of 'women' directly from the glossary of national discourse promoted by the EPLF's Marxist ideological stand. Also it seems to echo a socialist tone, with a prospect that socialist project of emancipation would bring a total end to all problems women are facing. I would argue here, women's participation and access to social and political structures are (more or less) assumed to bring changes (rather dramatically). Giving access for women would improve (i.e., women's status) for changing the perception of society but of course, we know now that both changes are entirely limited.

Bernal quoting from Hale (1997), stresses on the limitation of such changes by refuting "there is a tendency among Eritrean and in the scholarship now appearing to romanticize Eritrea's revolutionary period and to contrast it with what is emerging as a more conservative regime now that it holds their reins of national power," (2000, 63). Thus, this argumentation seems to have stemmed not so much from essentialist view with a belief that women's

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4520/5/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://dickinsg.intrasun.tcnj.edu/films/basil/bio.html>

liberation project is something inherent or ‘fixed’ with a responsibility given to EPLF to act upon, but modernist- socialist.

This is justifiable as it is a common experience for socialist countries or national liberation movements with Marxist or socialist ideological foundation such as the EPLF. A tendency of believing women’s participation added with access or legislative reforms would lead to the process of emancipation and putting at the high-ground. I argue such tendency has shortcomings

First on economic or legislative benefits reforms were not deeply entrenched in the principle of lived-experience of women. This is similar to Poststructuralist claim, failure to combat economic aspect rooted in classical thinking of socialist view of “equal participation of women in economic life will lead quasi-automatically to wider gender equality,” also by combating ‘domestic relationship and household burden,’ (Muller, 2005: 20).

Second on the assumption, i.e., change of law would bring change in a society using plain theoretical base uncritically. Moyneux puts it “some feminist writings imply that they are never adequately re-establish and that this is why socialism has failed to fulfil its promise to emancipate women,” (1986: 229). Therefore, in both cases for Marxists and Poststructuralists the above argument is an issue which ‘lays at the heart of the debate about the relations between socialist revolution and women’s emancipation projects’.

Before summing up this part, it is worth to note, first, according to the postulation of Marxists, participation of women in the EPLF is a precondition for swift process of emancipation. Two, in male-dominated movement such as the EPLF women more or less are perceived to have identical experience. Three, for promoting common experience ‘conscious-rising’ among group of women fighters is significant in leading the process of ‘knowledge generation,’ (Snyder, 2008: 184). In contrast, to clearly show the space between women’s lived-reality and the ‘dominant discourses’ addressing specificity is vital for Poststructuralists. However, they too ‘lack formalised structure’ in addressing exactly the price of specificity, (Snyder, 2008: 184).

### **3.3. Paying price of specificity: a focus on national cause**

In one word, subsuming women’s issue with the national one dissolves the ‘specificity’ of women’s voice by ‘fore-grounding’ the bigger national cause of liberating the country. Simply put all forces within nationalist movements were united against common enemy, and differences among women in terms of class, age, and gender are sidelined. This was a coveted ground for the EPLF to consolidate their power and not to be held account for the need of

various groups. This point can be comparatively proved by the critical observations made by Mayneux, where homogeneity accounted more for the strength and ultimate success of many nationalist movements and the EPLF was not alien in such a landscape, (1986: 227-8).

In similar retrospect, most of the authors (Davidson *et al*, 1980) ;( Wilson, 1991), time and again, associate participation, emancipation and women's conceptualisation equivalently with national movements and equate it with many controversial issues such as land, (1980:108-9). This was done by making a case a 'revolutionary EPLF' would take the lead in distribution and allocation of land to women and other oppressed group in a society.

Comparing this type of reasoning with what was happening to civilian-women in non-liberated areas the trend was developing in an opposite direction. Except making a simple point on gender policy, the EPLF was taking the lead in redistributing and reallocating resources including land rights for women in order to justify its position. Nonetheless, what happened as the result these reforms by the EPLF in both areas are beyond the domain of this research.

As I will argue later, on the basis of gender analysis, Davidson *et al* narratives are not merely simplistic especially when it comes to the subsequent concepts of participation and emancipation. But also simply representative of acclaiming the EPLF as revolutionary that saved women in the generalisation form.

Perhaps one explanation for such inclination could be the timing of the piece, it came during 1980s where many scholars sympathetic to an Eritrean cause were massively campaigning and specifically for the EPLF in different parts of the world. Basically done by embracing its ideological and doctrinal principles including women's agenda in the campaign and to get support from countries in the socialist bloc such as the former USSR.

Feminist literatures such as Malyneux elucidates in this instance, emancipation of women is allegedly used as a means of 'socialist transformation,' (1998:5). Typical instance, the marriage legislation on the conceptualisation of women can be cited "the marriage legislation that EPLF promulgated in 1978 which is totally contrary to the laws and tradition of the patriarch society. According to this law, forced child marriages are, among other things, abolished in the liberated zones. As divorce, it no longer depends only on the will and whim of the man," (Davidson *et al*. 1980: 108).

I consent with Malyneux's elucidation that such writings have limitation in viewing the overall transformation lies on the socialist women's emancipation project – law is changed but the change of law cannot (in itself) change the belief and practices of the society. Nor it is enough to change position of women. Apparently, it is almost impossible to make substantial

changes in women's lives if the only targets of interventions are women (and not men, social structures etc).

These facts can be further substantiated, by Hale's contention even if the EPLF has played a crucial role in diminishing so many harmful practices against women by establishing 'gender emancipated population' among male and female combatants. In reality, "too much was still controlled by men... even National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was not independent of the male cadres," (2001: 158-159).

To sum up this part, the writings which put more women as main actors a case (in the national liberation movements), thus, using access do not guarantee emancipation. The failure of these projects built on such theory is inevitable, (Kandiyoti, 1998:7). Again, a caution need to be placed where women's role in the national project is much more complex than we usually contemplate, (Kandiyoti 1998:7) As women were merely involved in such project under guise of 'national actors' as coined by Kandiyoti. Within this situation their position is embedded with the socially constructed concept of 'femininity' and articulating gender interest in coherence with the national discourse, (Kandiyoti, 1998:5).

Conclusively, I would like to argue that it is highly improbable that the conceptualisation of both the Marxists or Poststructuralist or nationalists for that matter can be autonomous from discourses and other power network that produces them, (Kandiyoti, 1998:5). Thus, all boils into the comparative analysis whereby Marxist such as (Davidson, 1980); (Wilson, 1991), (Worku, 1994), (Tesfa, 2002) claim the sites of awareness occurred as identical experience for all women participants of the liberation war. Whereas, Poststructuralists such as (Muller, 2005), (Bernal, 2001/2000); (Akinola, 2007) tend to reject the 'universalist claim' that all women have common experiences without rejecting the Marxists conceptualisation on experience. For Synder, "women still look to personal experience to provide knowledge about how the world operates and the trouble to be dominant narratives about how things should be," (Synder, 2008: 184). This rises significant questions on what participation meant for individual Eritrean combatant the meaning has so far operated in linear equation of participation, equality and then emancipation. However, it should operate in such a complex way of including cross-cutting and intersecting diversities of women's identity, (Snyder, 2008: 184). In what follow I shall explain the national and other subsequent discourses affecting the scholarships.



### 3.4. Discourses affecting the scholarships

The Marxists scholarship seems to undoubtedly reinforce the national discourse rallied by the EPLF. Muller quoting from (Sorenson, 1991), defines the Eritrean national discourse as, "...an expression of national identity based on common experience and its myths and narratives are created and altered together with these experiences," (2005: 48). In light with Muller's argument, many scholarship or even 'future-oriented ideologies' were moulded by the nationalist discourse to embrace the view that women in the EPLF's program, (2005:48).

Coming particularly to analyse the nationalist discourse, Sorenson, (1990) makes a key observation that the EPLF amplify the national discourse by bringing women's issue concurrently with the national one. Unveiling:

...EPLF cultural shows do portray women engaged in traditional subsistence and production activities, and emphasise ethnic costume and hair-style. While intended to acknowledge and express appreciation for all ethnic groups in order to secure their support, these productions do not simply appeal to tradition by endorsing subordination of women. Instead, they challenge patriarchal authority, stressing women's participation in health care, administration, and the military, and offering new emancipatory symbols, (Sorenson, 1990: 310).

Manson enlists several reasons as to why the national discourse has been dominantly affecting the scholarships. First, most of the existing literature was centred by the EPLF. Many foreign researchers belonging to either school came to the field with little background knowledge about the front in particular and Eritrean society in general. Manson argues, "...such research examines the vital role of the EPLF in initiating gender-based reforms to alter land ownership, marriage and personal laws, political participation, education and health," (2002: 2). In such away, the EPLF even took further step of equating the discourse of participation in terms of citizenship.

In this sense, the current discourse on Eritrean women largely categorizes their participation in the liberation struggle only in active or passive terms, a distinction that remains central to notions of Eritrean citizenship today, (Manson, 2002:1).

Second, during 1970s when the EPLF split from the ELF as a result of the programmatic and leadership reasons, most of the leaders who advocated for the secession possessed an affirmative Marxist vision towards women and gender, (Manson, 2002: 2). This affirmative vision of the leaders has affected many scholarly works produced at that time and also for many works of foreign researchers. This has a direct impact to strengthen the already strong national discourse and for both nationalist or non-nationalist involved while conceptualisation. Manson quoting from Sherman reveals:

The EPLF's loosely socialist ideology largely informed this discourse since it linked women's oppression to social production. This, in turn, developed into a critique of women's role in the domestic sphere; thus "domestic" contributions to liberation as opposed to military participation were

consistently undervalued and articulated as a postponement of the “woman question” by the ELF, (Manson, 2002: 2).

Other discourses mostly followed Poststructuralist researchers question ‘the social transformation’ made by the EPLF especially on women, disclose as to why the national discourse has affected many scholars, they entail, “the EPLF discourse flowed into the research of foreign academics and journalists during the wartime period” (Manson, 2002: 4). As Manson explained because of so many challenges one is what she called ‘methodological’ “... the problems arose since most researchers spent a limited time in Eritrea and travelled almost exclusively with the EPLF, with no knowledge of Eritrean languages or culture except that which was explained to them,” (2002: 5).

This entails the researchers point of view was confined to specific view and the view takes one specific example of conceptualising women by enforcing national discourse. Tesfa offers a similar view of highlighting the front’s agenda on women claimed, the EPLF ‘realised’ that success of the struggle is doubtful without a complete participation of women, accordingly full participation leading to different gains in different realms, (2002: 133).

However, drawing from Gemenez’s note, I remain sceptical about the trend and for ‘over-generalisation’ for two moves. One is the so-called oppressed women who achieved many gains in the society were not all ‘powerless’ and ‘exploited’ who sought to be saved by the EPLF. Second, not all the men who architected the male-dominated project (initiative made by the EPLF) of liberating and including them in the struggle were powerful. Thus, going one step further and looking for an explanation that draws fine-line between levels of oppression and the identity of the ‘oppressed’ needs diverse analysis and taking the concept of women using lenses of heterogeneity, (2000: 7).

### **3.5. Concept of women: in homogeneity or heterogeneity?**

The comforting expression made by authors like Davidson *et al* denotes a constant appreciation of EPLF’s role through essentialising women. This has been done by putting women in a sealed category - ‘single entity,’ which in itself raises an important question of women’s agency, (Molyneux, 1986: 227-8).

This not only essentialises and overrules women agency but also reminds us to be alert that the concept of women is a “discursive category where [it] is historically constructed and traversed by more than one differential axis,” (Gemenez, 2000:7). I will argue with the emphasis “discursively constructed” where gender, sexualities, bodies, and various differences among women are ignored, however, it is not to rebut the difficulty of creating a

link between lived-experience of women and feminist theories for discursively constructed concepts such as women, (Gemenez, 2000:7).

Moreover, Davidson (1980) and Tesfa (2002) pieces are similar to Marxists claim on homogenous identity of women, however, for Poststructuralists there is an alternative avenue of stressing on the personal experiences of women. Synder (2008) raises a point, while addressing the ‘shared experience’ and some feminist theorists vary in questioning on how feminism would survive without category. It is from opposing this angle that the Poststructuralists desert the idea of taking feminism into ‘social movement’ all together.

According to Poststructuralist argument instead of merely focusing on shared identity, women need to act together responding to a stiff debate of 1980s that slowed ‘feminist theory and practice,’ (Synder, 2008: 183). Theoretically speaking, however, Poststructuralists gauge more on the ‘wider array of identity’ aspects of women than did Marxists; also came up with more encompassing analytical edge in conceptualising women worldwide, (Synder, 2008: 187-8).

Tesfa’s piece which seems to be short in the concrete analysis of the dynamics involved in problematising the concept of “women” He reveals:

Women were integrated in all areas of the front by participating in clandestine operation in enemy occupied territory and in the diaspora, contributing morally and materially as well as personally. Women fighters worked in all sectors as platoon leaders, front-line fighters, health workers and teachers, administrators, mechanics, drivers, and other non-traditional roles. As more and more women joined the liberations struggle, they became equal claimants to the fight for independence (self determination) (Tesfa, 2002: 133-134).

Many authors similar to above text, tries to validate their statement by framing diverse and intersecting identity of women using unitary category. As explained by Molyneux, such a claim has an application to the debate about women’s capacity to struggle for social change that has been be done by recognizing difference rather than assuming homogeneity (1986:232).

### **3.5. Nationalism: emancipatory for individual women or the front?**

There has of course also been some works (which partially tackled) concepts of participation while theorising the liberation struggle in Eritrea. One of the best examples is David Pool’s: *‘From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front.’* Pool explains how ‘socio-class structure’ aspect played an essential component of the EPLF’s political skew to provide the basis for including women. His departure of analysis comes from an angle of the “ideological framework” where the EPLF used for mobilisation women as part of the ‘other oppressed masses,’ (2001b:88-89).

Perhaps the strength of Pool's analysis lies on his critical review on the foundational charter of the EPLF itself. Most probably written by then the secretary of the front current president of the county, the 1971 manifesto of '*Nehnan Elamanan*'.<sup>10</sup>

The manifesto basically used Marxist-Leninist languages as its conceptual devise. The charter also initiated the EPLF's project of secession from its counterpart the ELF during 1970s. The main interest looking at this particular text (highlighted by Pool) is to make a reflective observation for the different discourses especially for Marxist inclination. And also to see the effect it had especially for both schools in which this research is examined, not on what happened between ELF and EPLF, (Akinola, 2007).

Pool who also draws from 1977 - EPLF's National Development Program (NDP) which possess a separate section under 'social rights' deals with women's (equality in politics, economy and social life) clearly related the social transformation with question of women. From critical remark of Pool it can be noted women were typically 'targeted' for specific mission of national question through induced project of social change architected by the male-dominated leadership of the EPLF, (2001: 88-89).

The text in question despite its inclination towards the EPLF stand which is more into Marxists makes critical important moves: first inquires on the EPLF's index of incorporating women into its force usually exaggerated. Second questions the validity of the quantitative representation of women in different streams; and third questions the political treatment of women by the EPLF. From Pool's piece it can be summed, whole concept of women was related with material or structural transformation more or less induced to women on top-down basis.

### **3.6. Induced liberation through transformation**

More into Poststructuralist analysis, Victoria Bernal's piece: *From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and Development in Eritrea* (2001) looks critically at the

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<sup>10</sup> "*Nehnan Elamanan* (lit. Our struggle and its goals), a manifesto issued anonymously in 1970 but usually attributed to Isaias Afeworki, then a rising political star who would become EPLF Secretary General. *Nehnan Elamanan* emerged immediately after Addis Ababa's first show of weakness since the beginning of the insurgency and after ELF ranks had been rocked by claims of discrimination against Christian recruits from highlands. That *Nehnan Elamanan* spoke up for victims of perceived publicity on the part of the ELF may have lent the manifesto a subtle ethnic slant but its critique was transcendent. Partisans of the campaign, the document stated, were neither Christian nor Moslems; they were only Eritrean keen to free their homeland from all forms of domination," (Akinola, 2007:52).

construction of concept of 'participation' from Marxist and Socialist instances. Right from the beginning, she warns the reader to be on-guard from the unifying or 'pre-packaging' national discourse to borrow a term from, (Asad, 2007).

She also tackles thoroughly on the induced participation by tracing the mechanisms used by the front to incorporate women in different realms. She has done that by problematising gender, and gender equality framework. From her analysis it can be drawn, diverse concepts meant differently for different group of women. As she has plainly argued failure to clearly understand this framework had a repercussion for what happened in post-independence era. The scenario she called "repression of the domestic" and "the erasure of the feminine" by the EPLF, (2000: 61).

Sandra Hale shares a parallel view, in her piece *The State of the Women's Movement in Eritrea* (2001) but takes the issue one step further by posing on the transition of identity of women fighters. Her gist statement mainly focuses on the post-independence era of the transition scenario of 'home-front to battle-front' and 'from battle-front to home-front,' (Weldegorghish, 2005: 98); (Bernal, 2001:155).

The transition is related to the common phenomenon in most liberation movements such as in Algeria. Once the liberation is accomplished, women return to their formal submerged position signalling 'go home' scene. In Eritrean case, according to the generalisation adapted from Hale (2001), women have joined the armed struggle by breaking through the conservative society. As a result they have gone through many 'social transformations' in gender roles and responsibilities under the leadership of the EPLF, however, after independence of the country was achieved, most of the women tend to lose their former gains facing enormous problems of incorporation. It is this irony of 'gain-diminishing' situation what Bernal also referred to a move from 'home-front to battle-front and from battle-front to home-front'.

While, it is important to acknowledge authors like Hale (2001); Bernal (2000) and Muller (2005) have precisely questioned induced liberation for women under disguise of social transformation. But I will argue it is important to raise questions such as to what extent does women's participation in the struggle against gender inequality has been regarded by many authors as an obvious response to widespread social repression? Why so much dependency to the rosy depictions of the EPLF as 'visionary' or 'strategic' while theorising? Why women's so-called project of 'emancipation' or 'participation' has been put as the unifying discourse without being subjected to rigorous analysis by scholars? (Akinola, 2007) My reply to some of the questions is somewhat women's revolutionary involvement including in combat units

was seen as an effect of the universalising character for overcoming subordination. For that reason one unifying discourse was needed to keep things intact and the vacuum was filled by the EPLF itself, (Bernal, 2001).

To put a summation to this section, the Marxists perspective conclude that EPLF's policy provided women participants to have great stake in different spheres. I consent with Hale's assertion that the EPLF for various political purposes women had "full participated" and this was great opportunity to show their potential in different levels " ...that the national discourse represent women as full participants in military struggle – not as substitutes, but full-fledged citizens of revolutionary Eritrean," (Hale, 2001, 159). Despite that the war somehow gave an opportunity or was an experimenting ground for women to reveal their potential. I am not convinced, however, about the process military participation is a prerequisite for all emancipation processes.

### **3.7. Socialist emancipation project: a continuity**

Davidson, Cliffe and Gebere Selassie piece has many instances where it provides us many 'structural' way of conceptualising emancipation and participation and women. For instance excerpts from the analysis "...since 95% of Eritrean women are illiterate, the efforts to combat illiteracy constitute an important factor in the emancipation of women" (1980: 108). Here there is an explicit statement that links (socialist) concept of emancipation of women to education (literacy).

It is important also to note, i.e. socialist idea about emancipation of women really focuses on women. It was assumed that society will change as women change, but there were very limited interventions into society (except for the legal change divorce, custody, property etc.) which is more or less brought about legal equality. This point is well argued by Molyneux while critiquing the conceptualisation of women's participation in Sandistat's army in Nicaragua (1986).

At this stage two moves need to be underlined, one the more these authors see participation, emancipation or women (in fixed way), the more emancipation is evident and vice versa– which is contrary to feminist Poststructuralist orientation. For that reason they remain non-critical and adversely mainstream. Two, it is interesting to see a number of authors in this context such as Muller (2005); Bernal (2001); and Hale (2000) whose writings are critical – stating explicitly that education, employment and political participation of women are imperative, but not sufficient for entire social transformation or 'paradigm shift' sort to say.

In contrast, statements marring in most parts of Davidson *et al* (1980); Wilson (1991); Worku (1994); the EPLF's NDP (1977) etc. firmly ground participation with the 'ongoing transformation' linked with Marxist postulation falls under the first move. Contrary to that for Poststructuralists taking the first move would be a major peril as the outcome of such change proved to be very limited because of the entire reason was built with male-centred project.

### **3.8. Centring nationalism as politics: a male-centred project**

As it has been noted earlier, the credit took by the EPLF in involving women in the national liberation struggle has equally affected the scholarly discourses. Bernal (2000) further probes, despite women's crucial role in the national struggle, most of the "scholarship is characterized by conceptual approaches which conceptualises nationalism as politics," (2000: 64). She does that by critically observing to some of the authors whose pieces I have been taken onboard in this research, arguing:

There are growing body of work on Eritrean nationalism (Cliffe and Davison 1988; Habte Selassie 1980; Iyob 1995; Lewis 1983; Markakis 1988; Pateman 1990, among others). Despite the significant roles played by women in Eritrea's nationalist struggle, however, this scholarship is characterized by conceptual approaches which conceptualise nationalism as politics, and politics as a realm distinct from culture, gender, and domestic relations. Women's involvement in the nationalist struggle is treated as an EPLF achievement - another testimony to the goodness and justice of the Eritrean cause and its EPLF representatives, (Bernal 2000: 64).

Perhaps, the best part of her analysis rest in a summation, on one hand, these literature remains biased for been 'partisan, paternalistic and male-centred' and also they reveal the fact that nationalism is a 'male oriented scheme' taking women as parasites, (Bernal 2000: 64). She concludes, "my analysis of the situation of Eritrean women guerrilla fighters makes clear that national regimes are always also gender regimes," (Bernal 2000: 64).

In contrast from other feminist sources, more significantly Kandiyoti criticises the language of nationalism which unitarily call women in terms of 'symbolic repository' which singles women in a singular form. Kandiyoti points, nationalism using vocabulary of 'kinship, motherland to or by creating inherent ties in-between'. Here goal seems close to realisation that 'nationness' is thus equated with 'gender, parentage, skin-colour to which all are attached by virtue of self attachment' and sacrifice (1998:6). National promises and reaffirmation is done by continuous rhetoric where nation is projected as woman who is in need of protection by bringing the distinction between the nation and 'others' (1998:2).

More on this, (Davidson *et al* 1980); (Wilson 1991) used languages of nationalism in relation to Marxist or socialist project of women's emancipation. Such writings which are

evident in most texts of 1970s and 1980s mainly concluded participation equally benefited women, leading them to the process of emancipation. Keeping a positive views towards the national discourse basically frame the EPLF as ideologically and doctrinally mature by bracketing the 'other' perspectives as 'reactionary or backward'.

Comparatively, Marxists believed political or economic or structural change would bring an ultimate social change, and this change would improve and save women from the destitute situation women. However, Poststructuralists underscore these changes are limited and narrowly conceptualised without applying lenses of acknowledging differences which is vital. As not all women experience the same experience.

Again, the economic and political access subscribed by the EPLF in agricultural, and other aspects were ultimately equated as part and parcel of women's participation in the national liberation with the ongoing transformation structure. As Poststructuralists would argue, participation and emancipation should be perceived with intersectionality of gender, class, age, and etcetera and not merely in terms of homogeneity or unifying national discourse, (Davis, 2008).

One common factor for most writings on Marxists, they tend to appreciate the situation of the EPLF as liberators. While, Poststructuralist not only are sceptical about this inclination but also argued the EPLF has submerged the individual voice by subsuming them in the bigger national question. Finally, in similar retrospect, Poststructuralist acknowledged the complexity of diverse voices by putting a question mark on the success of social transformation.

As a result, Poststructuralists are not determined to spend a lot of time and energy in constructing 'theoretical analyses or justification on what grounds they are acting.' According to Synder they just do it and in a duality of join us or we will carry on basis, (2008: 188). Here, it does not try 'to present a unified vision with which every woman can agree,' (Synder, 2008: 188).

In a nutshell, I argue, for ideological or discursive reasons these concepts were reinforced or redefined to fostered bigger stake- national goal, (Muller, 2005). All in all, Poststructuralist scholars like Bernal, Muller, Manson etc. plea to their readers to stay alert by distancing themselves from the dominant nationalist or modernist conceptualisations that gender inequalities could be 'overcome by progress,' (Bernal, 2000:69).



### **3.9. Widening the frame of participation**

Muller in her piece “*The Making of Elite Women: Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea*” (2005) traces the whole issue from an approach of a “Revolution”. She further pin-points the difference between rebellion, revolt, coups, and wars of independence with clear emphasis that all don’t involve ‘change in the social structure and values,’ (2005: 8). She consolidates her argument with a statement: “majority of societies in which social revolution took place in the twentieth century were characterised by great gender inequalities. In turn most revolution movement had the emancipation of women high on their agenda, what equally applies for Eritrea, (2005: 16)”.

Muller, starts by cautioning the reader to take on board two instances. One is what exists in literature is either produced by EPLF itself or politically instigated by EPLF’s publication. Or a scholarly works which have been done by merely interviewing former EPLF fighters or by simply spending limited amount of time with the EPLF in the field, (2005: 47).

Muller who wrote extensively about Eritrean cause, shares these views by probing the whole scenery of women participation, for her, mobilising women and integrating them was geared towards fostering the EPLF’s motto: “*Equality through Equal Participation*’. In plain language, as long as participation is not there, there will never be equality sort to say. Muller concludes there seems an existence of a very fragmented view of life in the field and concept of women’s liberation, (2005: 147).

Muller, however, comes to this term for conceptualising concepts of ‘emancipation’ and ‘participation’ in liberation wars with analogies of Mozambican’s FRELIMO. She postulates, “it was impossible to otherwise to push an agenda of female-emancipation through in a revolutionary society in the developing world characterised by male supremacy and where so many other problems related to poverty and deprivation were considered more urgent,” (2005: 19). She even argued the more number of women participate in armed struggle, the more they will achieve ‘gender equality’ in revolutionary context, where most of the scholarly framing is common, (2005: 19). She takes these concepts in concrete form by underlining on the diverse conceptualisation.

### **3.10. Participation and emancipation as learned experiences**

Worku (1994) perspective shooting from nationalist discourse unveils: to be ‘dressed in military uniform and to carry guns and walk in line with men’; ‘escape an arranged marriage’; to ‘escape the first night of their marriage’ or something in the society, culture, history

‘motivated them to naturally join, (1994:19). Hence, a significant point to make is, there is markedly different way of conceptualising participation and from this it can be deduced women participated in the liberation struggle with various agenda.

For Muller “there seems little room for women’s own vision of emancipation and, contrary to all official declarations and the front’s many publication on these issues; women’s interest and those of the Front or the present Eritrean State are not necessarily identical” (2005:57). Drawing from Bernal, EPLF’s agenda of gender equality can be summarized ‘not simply as the equals of men, but as male equivalents’ (2000:62). This is manifested by Muller’s summation:

Even though the EPLF defined itself in terms of both, national liberation and revolutionising society, one needs to keep in mind that it was the question of nation building that was the overarching objective, and women within the EPLF were regarded first and foremost as an integral part of this process. According to Wilson, this has a major impact on the way women experienced their own identity,(Muller, 2005: 47)

Thus, placing women’s right at the main stage has been called as “one of the most striking features of EPLF’s programme of social reform” Muller (2005: 47). She emphasises “... EPLF’s gender analysis was largely based on socialist theories which regard women’s integration into social production as the cornerstone from which social and political emancipation,”

Furthermore, Its agenda on women has to be viewed within the general modernist outlook of the EPLF and its secular, scientific and socialist orientation, which helps to explain that women’s advancement assumed such a central role, as “gender relations and the treatment of women figure in the ways modernity and progress are constructed in contrast to tradition”(Bernal, 2000: 66). As has been discussed above, many parallels can be seen with other revolutionary movements as well as with state feminism in (former) socialist countries. The emancipation of women here is regarded as central to achieve a wider objective (in the case of Eritrea, success of the Eritrean revolution), a “crucially different emphasis from feminist [perspective] which sees women’s emancipation exclusively in terms of women’s interests,” (Muller, 2005:49).

Therefore, one common denominator for most of the texts I have gone through is the view: participation of women within the EPLF was considered as one of the major achievements of the successful EPLF gender policy. However, I have found critical writings which claim “Eritrean nationalism remained a ‘male project’, of which women are constructed as one of the beneficiaries,” (Bernal, 2000). It can be concluded in such a way that one of the EPLF failures which happened to continue even in the current government’s view in stressing women’s emancipation on political angle with an utter neglect for ‘personal transformation’, (Muller, 2005); (Bernal, 2000).

This shortcoming has its roots in the EPLF’s early socialist –modernist, which like the ideology of many revolutionary movements with similar roots is characterised

by the lack of a theory of personality. This lack in turn lead to women's emancipating being conceived of mainly interest of how functional it was for achieving wider objectives of the revolution or later the state, (Muller, 2005: 56).

### **3.11. Marxists and Poststructuralists: in duality or complementarity?**

To have a larger view, on the discussion of conceptualising the participation, emancipation and women at this juncture, I have asked what are the basic similarities and differences between the Marxists and Poststructuralists. The Marxist claims the sites of consciousness rising occurs in the 'face-to-face' interaction of all women. Whereas, the Poststructuralists tend to reject the 'universalist claim' that all women have common experiences without an overall rejection of the Marxists' concept of experience. For them according to Snyder "women still look to personal experience to provide knowledge about how the world operates and the trouble to be dominant narratives about how things should be," (2008: 184).

In relation to focus and epistemic claims let me underscore a point, i.e., Poststructuralists similar to the Marxists are short in having a formalized structure in their argument, with the hope that taking merely the lived experience would have effect for overall societal structures in which these women live according to Snyder, (2008: 184).

Markedly, Marxists and Poststructuralists share commonality in their stress of common goal towards the women's wellbeing, Marxist from their theoretically inherent support of human agency and Poststructuralist acknowledging diversity and heterogeneity. Both schools however, opt for larger participation of women at all levels.

In hinge-sight it can be observed that Poststructuralists literature struggles to prove a point where different categories of experiences in relation to class, race, ethnicity and gender affect the lived experience of women in general.

Furthermore, the Marxists collapse of "category of women" is related to the larger trend of second-wave feminism intellectual move as Snyder precisely put "...away from the grand narratives of modernity and into the foundationless world of post-modernity" (2008: 184).

While for Poststructuralists as Snyder put it:

In its emphasis on destabilising fixed definitions of gender and rejection of unitary notion of 'woman' and 'feminism', third-wave feminism is clearly informed and shaped by post-modern theory, well as other anti-foundationalist discourse such as post-colonialism and poststructuralism... also "Not assuming a unified category of women, most third-wavers take an anti-essentialist stance rejecting "the assumption that all members of a particular race, class, gender, or sexual orientation common characteristics, (2008: 187).

As Snyder draws analysis by noting Poststructuralists most of the time happen to be short-sighted for fully advocating on choices without clarity as how these choices are built and

operate and also without having a clue on how individual choices can have a hindering effect to 'gender relations' as a whole (2008: 189). This is not to deny that the richness of 'theoretical tools of academic feminism' helped Poststructuralists to go for "popular articulation of women's experiences in a postmodern, critical direction, rendering them more radical and theoretically sophisticated (Synder, 2008: 191). However, both Marxists and Poststructuralists provide an interesting position against the notions of "white, middle-class bias" of women (Synder, 2008: 181).

I consent with Synder that most of the Poststructuralists texts often tend to exhibit shortcomings of 'youthful myopia'; 'ignorance of history' and 'senses of self-importance' but as a new feminist movement it still makes more sense that needs to be given enough space theoretically and practically, (Synder, 2008: 183). As Synder put it a summation, Post-structuralism is not yet a social movement and it may never be the reason she reiterated:

...because it strives to be inclusive for all, collective action constitutes one of its biggest challenges, and one that it shares with other anti-foundationalist discourses, such as radical democracy. In fact, third-wave feminism is not unlike radical democracy. Both require the constant engagement of participants in the struggle for a better world, (Synder, 2008: 191).

In the above sections I have dealt with different political and intellectual discourses emanated broadly from various Marxists and Poststructuralists point of reference. I embarked on the identification of similarities and differences between the two scholarships to the concepts in-question. I have dealt with how women's participation within the EPLF was perceived using the central argument of the thesis making a comparative review. The conceptualisation made by Marxists was influenced by EPLF's political and nationalist discourse. Thus, revisiting those conceptualisations through critical reviews and examining discourses is much more relevant. It also appears to me that Marxists, given their rootedness in the society by connecting with the broader masses in that instance they have succeed in mobilising larger portion of women regardless of their divided identities. While Poststructuralists are sceptical about the transformation by critiquing Marxists for incomplete conceptualisation. As it was not easy for the EPLF to resist uneven enemy where less than 3.5 million people were caught in the fate of resisting 60 million.

## **4. Reflective observation on the discourses and different conceptualisation**

This part continues to examine the different discourses of representing Eritrean women's role in the national liberation movement. It draws on a close attention to the presentation of readings made in the previous chapters and analyses the network of representing and framing women. It discusses how the discourses and concepts are 'filtered and reinforced' by each of its proponent. The chapter also attempts to answer the gap between conceptualising women as diverse group and the front's unifying national discourse. Finally, it analyses each author's position/assumption in terms of the epistemological and discursive leaning of the two schools.

### **4.1. Framing emancipation via participation: a blend or blind logic?**

As disclosed in the afore chapters, nationalism has a long and stormy history in Eritrea. The first shot fired in the mountains of Adal in Western part of Eritrea, not only marked the beginning of Eritrean independence struggle but also had much more 'symbolic impact'. It stirred the 'nationalist passions' that ignited a 30- year armed struggle currently moulding a dominant identity in Eritrea.

The EPLF by defeating its rival force (ELF) emerged as the mere champion in the field, this phenomenon helps to illuminate on the one hand, why much of the literature of 1970s Eritrea is full of 'romantic images' of the EPLF. On the stands of 'women's question', and 'equality through participation' and 'gender-equality,' on the other hand, help us to question as many observers at that time predicted for the "Eritrean independence was certain under the EPLF's watch". At any rate, the logic employed in both cases in the debate must be 'deconstructed' and 'analysed,' (Akinola, 2007:47).

One of the typical framing of women's participation belongs to the national discourse developed by many historians as well as feminist from inside and outside Eritrea. A claim is emancipating women through freeing women from pressing social impediments as one of the major roles played by the EPLF. This line of discourse still puts the EPLF categorically as Marxist for a move of strength of 'centralised structure' filled with a 'radical public rhetoric' in addressing gender relations, land reforms, etc. (Akinola, 2007:47).

According to this causal-effect argument, such qualities of structural change are strong enough to enable reality-flip in the society where the reforms would lead to emancipation by increasing women's participation in the armed struggle. While presenting the different concepts and how they have been dealt by different authors in the previous chapter, I have pinpointed the linear statements interchangeably asserted by authors like (Wilson, 1991); (Gebremedhin, 1989) ; (Sherman, 1978).

In the *Challenge Road: Women and the Eritrean Revolution*, for example, (Wilson, 1991: 55) noted “all identities referring to familial or individual have been eroded in the areas where the EPLF was in control,” (Akinola, 2007:59). I discontent with the normative postulation made the more women participated, the more their personal identities are diluted to serve the national discourse. Akinola drawing from (Wilson, 1991: 116) notes the EPLF’s pressing objective was not creating more ‘socialist’ society rather ending ‘feudal system of production’.

This view unveils that ending the degrading position not will guarantee social changes but also doctrinal reforms. Again most of the literatures which existed at time show women members were required to refute their own identity in order to participate in the process of ‘their own liberation’. To accomplish that, Akinola discusses they had to accept the ‘male-inclined’ constructions of their place, (Akinola, 2007:59).

For me, plain statements that was given by Wilson presents a notion of duality where peasants are waging war against their landed masters; and women are joining the EPLF in unprecedented number including in combat units to wrestle male-domination. For whatsoever reason, one significant point must be put in light, i.e., many authors might have emphasised a lot about ‘social capital’ while conceptualising the process of women’s participation within the EPLF, (Akinola, 2007: 59).

Of course, for authors like Roy Pateman, *Eritrea, Even the Stones are Burning* (1990a: 471) who came up with a conclusion that ‘egalitarian process’ followed by the EPLF was the most effective way of ensuring party’s support and organization. Nonetheless, the literary portrayal of representing women’s participation as beneficiaries in full-swing participation under the front’s commitment of addressing the so-called ‘question of women’ was not only unrealistic but also unpractical. My argument is backed by Akinola’s exemplification that no women had any sit in the ‘executive council’ of the EPLF since 1987.

By and large, it can be put in a summation that most of the historical and Marxist sources I have gone through in this research include: Pateman’s ‘egalitarian process’ and national organization; Gebremedhine’s peasant and revolution; Davidson’s *et al* nationalism and self determination; Tesfa’s women’s role and tradition. All in their conceptualisation of participation, emancipation and women hub from national discourse dominated by the EPLF. They also tend to see ‘women’s question’ largely as a subset to the biggest question, i.e., national one.

## **4.2. Women participants: ‘unagentic beings’**

The early writings in Eritrean liberation struggle specifically the early writings of 1970s and 1980s have interesting elements. For instance, the EPLF’s manifesto of NDP; pieces of Davidson and Sharman, which opened up a new avenue for feminist scholars in shifting their attention to explore and go beyond the ‘saving and emancipating’ scene to focus on ‘women’ own agency. To make a point that the imposition of early normative writings were sensitised by Poststructuralists who later wrote about it critically.

This became the most turning points for the heated debate in rediscovering women’s writing in the country. This move in a way helped to shape and brings a new discourse in regard conceptualisation of women. In fact many of the pieces put in glance in this research for instance works of Wilson (who integrated its argument starting from the narration of individual women fighters) allow us to see women were more clearly as a diverse group. For this reason, works like Muller (2005); Bernal (2000); Manson (2001) tried deepening the debate by adding to writing on women’s participation through critique of the national context.

In contrast, the writings of some Marxists and front’s documents remain ambiguous, because it fails to see the bond of relationship between individual women fighters and the EPLF. In addition, the problem of definitional ‘fixity’ on women’s identity for two reasons, in the first place, the particular meaning of each concept remained a gray territory for both women fighters and the front. The point here is that all women voices, also the conceptual meanings and practices of diverse women specific concepts was subsumed and silenced by the national question. Practically, by means of the front’s consolidating theme ‘equality through equal participation’ and by putting the front as something progressive under the costume of Marxist-Leninist parameters.

In reality taking the process of emancipation by keeping the identity of women fixed is the mechanisms used to by the front to keep the social and the national question solid. Basically the more they blend social issues with national one, the more audience they gain and the most convincing they become. On top of that, the politics of nationalism or national liberation movements were equivalently kept to maintain the discourses which literally shaped the conceptualisation by putting it as the most practical one.

Finally, incorporating point of ‘class’ using Marxian reasoning as Worku (1994) notes, within the EPLF, the assumption that creating ‘Socialist Eritrea’ was a prerequisite to halt women’s oppression. Such writing entails women’s participation would bring socialist mode of production which will resolve the problem of ‘class oppression’ eventually, would eradicate

social inequalities, (1994: 6). Taking this association to the next level with the whole debate about 'women's question' it remains discouraging in making analyses on what really constitute the relations between class and other identities.

Moreover, another interesting sight which is commonly marring across most of the nationalist texts is the point of popularising the nationalist discourse. First, Marxian doctrinal stand and language is used to tackle women's process of exclusion as 'invisible reproducers' barrowing a term from Abu-Lughod (1998). Second, however, after post-deconstruction era, most of feminists which similarly apply to Eritrean case go on to question the process of 'emancipation' through questioning women's entry into the public sphere. Paradoxically, this trend is embodied by the national discourse in the argument 'greater participation' along men would guarantee more space in the public, (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

### **4.3. Anchoring on nationalism**

For many reasons, one element seems to be common to many texts, i.e., nationalism become central argument. To bring a case in point, Wilson's piece builds her argument from personal narration of the fighters which participated by breaking through conservative society. The point is during 1980s, the concept of gender was not developed as yet, and the authors cannot be accused of not using it. But they can be accused of merely focusing on the gender roles and gender relations between men and women combatants and for believing changing laws would change everything as 'magic' pills.

As works like Bernal and Muller argue, the modernist discourse of the nationalists and other scholars disclose that the only means of 'achieving' liberation and 'emancipation' was to be different from the person they used to be. Using this rationale the same women who participated in the struggle were asked to achieve emancipation by dropping their former identity as mothers and wives. On the contrary, they were also acclaimed as future 'mothers of the nation and producers of warriors' as far as the era of post-independence Eritrea is concerned etc. (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

To sum up this part, there seem to be contentious spatial battle between the two scholarships I have read in the course of this research. This spatial battle is for the trophy of 'representation and framing' women's participation in the armed struggle both discursively and politically. It is equally significant to pose important questions such as why framing and representation? What were the rationales behind it? These questions will be discussed in the final section of this chapter by running through the arguments in broader from epistemological stand of the scholarships.



#### **4.4. Authors assumption and position**

In the final analysis of the previous chapter, I have argued on the sporadic problem of framing women by both schools. In this section, I will discuss in brief how standpoint theory is relevant for Marxists and Poststructuralists writings. In addition, I tried to answer the very crucial question that has been chasing me throughout the course of this research. What is the significance of analysing this conceptualisation? What value can they add to the overall theorisation on the discourses of women's participation in Eritrean case? To answer these questions, I have to revisit the theoretical 'threads and fibres', and to see individual authors' position/assumption by relying on standpoint theory, (Saffar, 1998:80).

The significance of feminist epistemology<sup>11</sup> is two-fold. In the first place, it makes critique towards science for 'sexist and andocentric' views, (Singer, 2003:1). In the second place, it advances the thinking of liberation for all marginalised groups including women (Singer, 2003:1). As Week argued, feminist standpoint makes specificity for any problem and explains the so-called monolithic identity which helps to make clear positionality in any given research (2006: 2). Having stated the significance of feminist standpoint theory, I now make the following moves.

For the EPLF sources or scholars affiliate to conceptualise women's participation by merely looking participation, emancipation and women/gender by referring to the Marxist glossary of them. Going back to the history and analysis of Feminist standpoint theory, one striking point is, Marxists tend to foster the idea that knowledge is situated - where different members of the society hold different epistemological position. Whereby the 'dominant social-class' has the legitimacy and epistemic privilege to decide what is to be regarded as 'knowledge or not' for others, (Singer, 2003:2).

Thus, the dominant discourse rallied by the EPLF and its Marxists proponents hold an epistemic privilege, this epistemic privilege entitled them to blend the national and women question together to make an argument 'my way or no way'. However, if the logic i.e., knowledge is 'perspectival' holds there is no need for the Marxists to favour and enforce the national discourse at the expense of the other, as each perspective is audible and accountable for the claim it makes.

On the contrary, Marxists allegedly pushed the 'situated knowledge' to the centre by fixing concepts and building on socialist modernist view. Once women took arms they will be fully participating and in the process will achieve full-emancipation. But, for Poststructuralists as

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<sup>11</sup> James Singer, (2003), Feminist Standpoint Theory, (unpublished manuscript), p.1

long as knowledge is situated, knowledge and voices of the marginalised women need to be given high priority.

As Weeks quoting from (Cornell, 1991/8) argued, Marxist's conceptualisation concentrate more on the 'structural' or 'class' differences between men and women. This restricts the movement of theorising and reaching other crosscutting identities of women beside class. In contrast, for Poststructuralists the 'lived realities' of women is significant for the overall conceptualisation. In many works, women's participation in liberation struggle in Eritrea was perceived in a counteractive way - Eritrean women took arms against the structural inequality they suffered. This was equally the perception and crucial mission of male-dominated front more lingering to Marxists, thus, women have no say, and the conceptualisation was made structurally rather than on-lived experience of women which happens to be subsumed in the national question, (Weeks, 2000:1).

Work done by Worku (1994); Wilson (1991); Gebremedhin (2002); and the EPLF programs such as NDP (1970s) see participation of women from the front's perspective. For instance, Worku Zerai wrote drawing from her own experience as an EPLF combatant and Wilson on individual narration both made significant mark in relation to how participation was perceived. However, works of Bernal (2000 & 2001); Hale (2001); Akinola (2007) refute the massive generalisation by questioning conceptual depth and breadth.

Therefore, this reveals the fact that conceptualisations were not only gendered but also highly clouded by the dominant discourse championed by the EPLF. Many Marxist scholars who took conceptualisation on women's participation from the dominant source, and the EPLF considered their position more objective than the other. Whereas, other conceptualisation on women's voice is fenced as purely 'subjective'. Thus, putting the so-called 'objective knowledge' as the only knowledge as 'the-historical knowledge' by sidelining women's lived-realities. This not only fixes concepts but also privileges certain authors at the expense of the other.

In addition to this, to fully conceptualise women's participation more concepts need to come out clearly. Even though concepts such as sexuality; masculinisation of women; women's 'ascribed identity' in times of war, (Emmanuel, 2004:53) were partially tackled by (Bernal, 2001); (Hale, 2001); (Stefanos, 1999); and (Pool, 2001) they remained still fully unexplored by current scholarly works. Finally, it vital to briefly note, proper conceptualisations towards given concepts can have practical solution to the problem that lies ahead for ex-women fighters who are facing problems in the post-independent Eritrea. Since

the same women who made a lot of contribution during the liberation struggle are facing a lot of 'reintegration problems', Bernal (2000:1).

I argue it is highly improbable that contemporary problem of 'reintegration' was merely resulted by socio-economic factors, but, also because of lack of clear understanding to the basic concepts floating all-over with shallow conceptualisation. So, having conceptual and theoretical clarity to the concepts added with the lived-experience of women can be a comprehensive solution for 'reintegration' of ex-women fighters in the country. At the end, I have discussed why standpoint theory is relevant for distilling issues of position and assumption of the authors belonging to either school. In spite of, classical Marxists standpoint, which delineates knowledge as 'perspectival' Marxist sources such as the EPLF tend to enforce their dominant discourse by referring the others as 'subjective' and 'a-historical' and asserting their knowledge as 'objective' and 'the historical.'

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to contribute to the theorisation of women's participation in the national liberation struggle in Eritrea by bringing the two schools of thought, Marxists and Poststructuralists. Needless to state, the area has been of enormous interest for feminist scholarship recently. Consequently, both schools were put under comparative analysis using specific concepts of women/gender, participation and emancipation and with multiple entries of questioning the unifying national discourse.

The thesis statement of the paper has been to show the similarities and differences between the two schools by questioning the national discourse as modernist ways of conceptualising. Subsequently, the following observations have been made in this paper:

First, the research has found out that the Eritrean case is not completely different from other national liberation movements that follow Marxist ideology. In almost every national liberation movement 'women's question' and the 'national questions' have been dealt as two sides of the same coin, where one is the prerequisite to achieve the other. Specifically in Eritrea this marching claim women's question has not reached maturity until the EPLF came into the political arena during 1970s is typically advocated by Marxists.

Second, while Poststructuralists show the same bias towards 'class', Marxists were influenced by the nationalist discourse with its roots going to the EPLF's Marxist ideological orientation of conceptualising class. Thus, it has been found out that Marxists authors believe in uniformity of women's identity, reinforcing the national discourse, and making wary generalisations. While Poststructuralists challenge the unifying category of women by defying fixity. Marxist logic take it's roots from the society in connection of mobilising the total mass, in contrast, Poststructuralists does not pay much more attention to incorporate history believing everything is centre-less. Most of the Marxists texts seem to enforce a 'me first' discourse, in other wards, they tend to follow and enforce what the EPLF was propagating. All in all, there seems to be a sporadic spatial battle between the two schools in the process of representing and framing women's participation in Eritrea. And this framing and representation has been affected mainly by the national discourse at the centre and the epistemological position of each at the periphery.

Third, while conceptualisation participation, emancipation and women/gender in broader terms have provoked a deep-seated debate between the two giant schools. Thus, it has been argued focusing on the lived-experience of women is solid rather than merely taking textual,

national or rhetoric aspect onboard. As it has been discussed Marxists conceptualisation is related to logic - if women participate, emancipation will be an inevitable outcome.

Poststructuralists, despite their theoretical limitations, mainly in situating social context, give us a more critical version by stressing on the dangers of representation, and generalisation. I argued conceptualisation based on the structural basis such as merely taking class element does not hold, as Cornell (1991/8) argued the lived-realities and identities of women cutting-across race, age, sex, rurality, urbanity etc need to be given a high-ground and priority.

Thus, it has also been argued conceptualisation on the 'women's question' by equating it with 'national question' not only over-rules diversity but also limits women's mobility and agency. Finally, despite differences between the two in terms of theoretical, discursive or epistemic claims they share commonality of advocating women's wellbeing and more participation.

(Word count 17,168)

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## Appendix

1. **Amrit Wilson** “is a writer and political activist and has published extensively on various aspects of British and Black Politics with particular reference to gender and race. She wrote ‘*The Challenge Road - Women and Revolution in Eritrea*,’ her other research interests include the construction of South Asian masculinity and the role of multi-ethnic/faith policies in the promotion of religious and quasi-religious identities” (Assessed on 16/07/2007)  
<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Health-and-SocialCare/About-Us/amrit%20wilson.html>
2. **Asegedet Stefanos:** “is an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her publications include “*Women and Education in Eritrea: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis*” in the Harvard Education Review. Reviewed photos of an independent documentary photographer Cheryl Hatch in December 1999. (*Eritrean Women: Defending National Borders and Challenging Gender Boundaries*)”.
3. **Basil Davison:** *Behind the War in Eritrea*, “an acclaimed British historian, writer and Africanist. He has written several books and movies on the current plight of Africa. Colonialism and the rise of African emancipation movements have been central a preoccupation of his work. His work helped break the narrow views of Africa and was able to study the history and culture in a more favourable light. He was able to break ground in the study of Africa, and helped popularize interest in the field throughout the world. Basil Davidson the writer of many books of anti-colonial struggles in Africa. Basil Davidson visited Eritrea at the time of the dramatic victory of EPLF in North East Sahel,” (Accessed on 16 /07/2008)  
<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4520/5/>
4. **Bereket Habte Selassie:** *Behind the War in Eritrea*, “is an Eritrean trained in international law in London who served as Attorney General of Ethiopia, then resigned in protest against human rights violations, especially in Eritrea, and ultimately joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). He now teaches in Washington, D.C (Robert McBride African Political Economy Review of African Political Economy - Vol. 9 No. 23)”.
5. **David Pool:** *From-Guerrillas-to-Government* “is lecturer in the department of government at the University of Manchester. Pool offers background for understanding the roots of the conflict in Eritrea by looking at Eritrean nationalism, the formation and operation of the liberation front of Eritrea, and the political forces at work in Eritrea's struggle for independence” Accessed on (19/07/08) <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/From-Guerrillas-to-Government/David-Pool/e/9780821413876>
6. **Lionel Cliffe:** *Behind the War in Eritrea* “is Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of Leeds. He has worked on and in Africa since 1960, in Tanzania, Kenya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. He was a founding editor of the Review of

African Political Economy; his work has focused on liberation struggles, on issues of land and rural development, and on peace and security” (Accessed on 16 07/2008)  
<http://www.nu.ac.za/CCS/default.asp?2,40,3,1341>

7. **Olufemi Akinola:** “*Politics and Identity Construction in Eritrean Studies, c. 1970-1991: The Making of Volx Erytree*” is an Assistant professor at the University of Asmara- Eritrea. His essay explores the nuances of identity construction in Eritrea from about 1970 to 1991. His essay examines how voix Érythrée took shape in the 1970s and 1980s, the individuals who formed the coalition of insurgent leaders and foot soldiers that nurtured the transformations, and how information about Eritrea in Western journals changed from a trickle to a flood. It also discusses major shifts in loyalties in Eritrea, how such shifts fed into the construction and appeal of liberationist discourse, and the building blocks of the field of Eritrean studies,” Weldehaimanot (01/ 04/,2008) Available online, <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4810/5/> (Accessed on 07/11/2008).
8. **Richard Sherman:** *The Unfinished Revolution*, “sympathetic observer’ of the Eritrean Liberation Movement puts history of conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia in to prospects by depicting the origin, structure and ideological structure of the EPLF and its foreign relations” ( assessed on 03/09/2008)<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19801201fabook13768/richard-sherman/eritrea-the-unfinished-revolution.html>
9. **Sandra Hale:** *The State of the Women’s Movement in Eritrea*, wrote about the participation of women in liberation struggle in Eritrea under the EPLF. Sondra Hale teaches at the *University of California, Los Angeles* wrote about Sudan on Gender; Islamism; Socialism; and the State in Sudan.
10. **Tekeste Fekadu:** “*From Nakfa to Nakfa: Back to Square One*, a medical doctor, senior member of Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), who wrote about the history of the (EPLF) with special emphasis to the history of medical unit of the EPLF. One of the first doctors to perform surgery during the struggle and wrote also on the EPLF policy of self-reliance and abdominal surgery his resent book is “*From Nakfa to Nakfa: Back to Square One*”.
11. **Tesfa G. Gebremedhin:** *Women, Tradition and Development: A Case study of Eritrea*, “is a Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics in the Division of Resource Management, West Virginia University. He has authored and co-authored five books and published numerous journal articles, books chapters, and technical research bulletins. His research is on rural and community development with emphasis on employment and income, poverty, education health and small farm businesses, and international agricultural development. His international professional experience included research in Eritrea, Mexico, Ethiopia and Ghana”–Cover page.
12. **Tanja R. Müller:** *The Making of Elite Women Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea*, “was assistant professor at Wageningen University worked in Women Leaders in Agriculture and the

Environment (AWLAE), worked on the implications of the HIV/AIDS pandemic for rural development in sub-Saharan Africa. She joined IDPM in January 2006. Her area of interest Eritrea, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Senegal, Japan, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Cuba,” Assessed on (02/08/08) [http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/staff/muller\\_tanja.htm](http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/staff/muller_tanja.htm)

13. **Victoria Bernal:** “*From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and Development in Eritrea*”; “*Equality to Die for? Women Guerrilla Fighters and Eritrea’s*” “associate Professor of Anthropology her research has addressed a range of issues relating to gender, migration, nationalism, transnationalism, development, cyberspace, and Islam. She has carried out ethnographic research in Eritrea, Tanzania, and the Sudan”. Accessed on (02/08/08) [http://www.anthro.uci.edu/faculty\\_bios/bernal/bernal.php](http://www.anthro.uci.edu/faculty_bios/bernal/bernal.php)
14. **Worku Zerai:** “*Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle,*” is social and gender consultant in Eritrea, an ISS alumni. One of the founding members of National Union of Eritrean of Women (NUEW); founding member of EPLF. One of the three women fighters who first joined the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front during 1970s. Wrote about the Participation of women in the liberation struggle in Eritrea (1961-1991) and the situation of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).