

## Women in Ethiopic Hagiographies

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The purpose of this project is to analyze Ethiopic hagiographies with female as their subjects. It attempts to show how women saints are portrayed in the hagiographies. The discussion is informed by the feminist literary approach to retrieve the representation of female voices from hagiographic literature, so heavily dominated by male authority and patriarchal values. After analyzing the already found hagiographies of female saints, I have come to conclusion that women saints are under represented in these narratives. I hope examining the manuscripts would show the importance of reading religious texts for providing insights about gender relations as they are articulated today. Therefore, it is hoped that what might emerge from analyzing the characters in the selected texts will provide a wider opportunity for understanding Ethiopian medieval literature. I also think it will help to expand the scope of scholarly investigation about the unique literary features of Ethiopic hagiographies.

In his book *Church and State in Ethiopia 1972*, Tadesse Tamrat divides Geez literature into two main periods: the first, called the 'Aksumite period', from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (with its centre of activity in the north); and the second, from the Solomonic Dynasty, from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He also separates the second period into two sections; from King Amda Seyon (1270) until the beginning of 15<sup>th</sup> century, and then from Zara Yacob (1434-68) until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

To the Aksumite period belong the royal inscriptions of Aksum and the Geez version of the Bible, already mentioned, patristic and hagiographic texts translated from Greek into Geez, such as: the Qerlos, a collection of patristic texts mainly on Christology, including monastic rules of Saint Pachomius, and The Lives of Saint Paul of Thebes and of Saint Anthony. According to Tadesse Tamrat, following the Muslim conquests and expansion (after the 7<sup>th</sup> century), Ethiopia was more isolated from the rest of the Christian world. This fact, as well as the fall of Axum, may explain why no new literary activity is known until the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The golden age and classical period of Ethiopic literature extends from the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. From the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century a new expansion is found in literature which is characterized by translations, not from Greek but from Arabic, though with originals being often in Coptic, Syriac or Greek; the texts are mainly theological works.

In his unpublished work *Accir yaethiopia tsinetsihuf tarik (A Short History of Ethiopian Literature) (1976 E.C)*, Amsalu Aklilu states, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, books started to be written—mostly religious books in translation, for example, of liturgical books, such as the lectionary for Holy Week (*Gibre Himamat*), the Praises of Mary (*Weddase Maryam*); and other texts such as The Acts of the Martyrs (*gedle Sama'etat*)

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were translated by the initiation of the monk Abune Selama. He also asked for a revision of the text of the Bible. Accounts of the Acts (*gedl*) of Ethiopian Saints also began to flourish from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and continued until the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. This type of literature goes back to Copto-Arabic and Greek traditions and is distinguished by a large body of hagiographical writings and a long tradition of secular history writing in the form of numerous royal chronicles, which are together such a valuable source of mediaeval history.

Hagiographies, writings that recount and celebrate the lives, deaths and posthumous miracles of men and women recognized as saints, comprise one of the major literary genres in Ethiopic literature of the Middle Ages. Hundreds of hagiographical texts both local and translated ones survive from this long period, a vast body of potential source material for the history and culture of the Medieval Ethiopian Orthodox church.

The paper attempts to demonstrate how Ethiopian women saints are portrayed in the hagiographies and to show both the central role of hagiography in medieval Ethiopian culture and the inherent appeal of the works in order to stimulate further research.

As with other genres of Ethiopic literature, we are ignorant of the authors and the dates when the hagiographies were written. A significant amount of Ethiopic hagiographical literature is anonymous. This may not be only due to the lack of documents from a given period, but also to an interpretation of the author's role that differs considerably from the interpretation of the term in use today. Hagiographers were often overawed by the church fathers and tended to re-tell and embellish stories they had heard or read rather than invent new stories. And even when they did create new material, they often claimed to be handing down something from predecessors. It may also be a matter of humility. From this point of view, the names of the individual authors seemed much less important, and therefore many works were never attributed to any specific author. This is the first problem we face when we study Ethiopic hagiographies.

Another problem is that most of the manuscripts were written by authors who did not have first-hand knowledge of their subject. These authors modeled their portraits on existing ideals of sanctity and drew upon a large body of traditional and somewhat standardized stories about saints. The life of a saint was usually written by a monk from the saint's own monastery, who sought by writing the work to glorify the saint and his monastery. His goal was not to write history in any modern critical sense of that word, and thus, the political, social, historical data, which are of such interest to us are accidental by-products which were of little concern to him.

Such stories were borrowed, sometimes with little change from earlier saints' lives and were intended to convey a moral message rather than historically accurate information. Ethiopic hagiographic works must sometimes be viewed with extreme caution, recognizing the fact that they reveal more about the religious and cultural world of their authors than about the actual lives of their subject.

To identify the exact date of the composition of the hagiographies is also very difficult. Most of them were being renewed time to time by different hagiographers. Conti Rossini, who viewed the date of composition as the crucial factor determined the date of composition, and then placed a text in one of three categories: those more or less biographical in character; important traditions affected by wondrous tales; and works written long after the event and of little significance. As simple as this approach appears, it is "not without serious shortcomings" Kaplan (1981). Kaplan goes on to say that not only is the date of composition difficult to determine, but it is also a dubious

concept when applied to "perpetually renewed" texts such as hagiographies. Moreover, this approach overemphasizes the date of composition to such an extent as to ignore other factors which influence the historicity of a text.

The records of the original hagiographies may also be destroyed for a number of reasons and that the present work may base upon traditions collected from memory. The testimony of the hagiographer can only help us to make a preliminary assessment of the hagiography since claims to have known the saint, to have been a contemporary or to have received the story from such a source may be stereotypical and spurious. Testimonies which date the hagiographies in terms of the major personages of the time are more reliable than those of contemporaries. The author added neither to his prestige nor to the credibility of his work by noting which king reigned at the time. Accordingly, he had little reason to falsify his claim.

All these texts are written in Ethiopic or Geez, and were clearly designed for monastic audiences; but a large number and variety of vernacular versions were produced in recent times suggesting that the legends eventually attracted most segments of the lay public as well. Although the popular character of the hagiographies has sometimes been exaggerated, there is no denying the strength of their influence on establishing religious culture. Favorite episodes are illustrated far and wide in church windows, frescoes, and paintings, many of them specifically commissioned by lay donors. Episodes from the legends also occupy a prominent place among the motifs chosen for illustration in books of hours and devotional articles made for private use by laymen and women.

In Ethiopia, a few studies have appeared which address the issue of the portrayal of saints and martyrs in Geez literature especially in *gedlat*. The best known studies were carried out by Tadesse Tamirat, Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke, Enrico Cerulli, Conti Rossini, Paulo Marrassini and Steven Kaplan. These scholars especially Conti Rossini and Enrico Cerulli did the most ambitious work in formulating a critical and historical approach to the hagiographies. They viewed the date of composition as the crucial factor in determining the historical value of the hagiographies. Steven Kaplan's work *The Monastic Holy man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia 1984* is I believe the most recent and comprehensive critical study of the hagiographies. Such studies are valuable and timely to be sure, since they begin to provide us with an entry into a relatively neglected area of Ethiopian literature. A substantial portion of this literature however emphasizes only the status of male saints. To my knowledge, no detailed research about hagiographies of Ethiopian female saints has been carried out. However, an attempt has recently been made by Verena Böll in the descriptive article *Holy Woman in Ethiopia (2003)*.

According to Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke (1975), we find no less than 200 hagiographies, written in Geez. Only eleven of them are written for local women. The enormous gap between the number of women's and men's hagiographies signals the male-centered concerns of the literature. The hagiographies of local female saints which we find in Geez manuscripts are: Kristos Semra, Fiqirte Kristos, Zena Mariam, Ema Wotete, Ema Shenkor, Walatta Petros, Mekbibe Dingil, Welete Mariam, Mesqel Kibra, Ehite Kristos and Ehite Petros. The Ethiopian Synaxarium includes the translated hagiographies: Arsema and Agatha, Barbara and Giuliana, Sofya and her daughters, Julitta, Matronya, Bazafzez, Theodra, Anastasia, Eugenia, Theophania, Sara (the Egyptian nun), Queen Helena and Liyarya (Hilaria). All Manuscripts except the hagiographies of Kristos

Semra, Ema Wotete, Ema Shenkor, Arsema and Agatha are found in libraries abroad especially in Bodleian and British libraries.

Without doubt one of the most striking features of this genre is its extraordinary emphasis upon the body, a body sometimes subject to appalling mortifications of the flesh, starvation, ritualized torture—severe beatings, immolation in scalding liquids or fiery furnaces, tongues torn out or breasts severed; and to Para mystical phenomena and bizarre insignia.

These stories tell of saintly bodies, instrument of divine will, vessel of God's Word, conduit of holy visions and marvelous miracles, imitator of Christ's suffering humanity—rendered whole again by the tender care of angels, carried aloft into heaven.

What is emphasized is devotion to the Passion and to Christ's humanity reflected in both voluntary and involuntary bodily imitations of His suffering: ascetism, fleshly mortification, a series of miracles often centered on food (including the Eucharist), on visions or dialogue with Christ.

The hagiographical text brought together body, book, and the divine Word. The intention of the hagiographer is, therefore, to validate saintly worth and to ensure the veneration of its subject. As such he is bound by contemporaneous notions of what it means to be a saint as well as generic convention. In addition, the writer works both as an instrument of the Church—in his impulse to sanction its authority and its teachings by documenting the life of his chosen subject as exemplum—and as a craftsman who creates his own image of the saint according to his perception.

The female hagiography is a textual representation that is ultimately also a cultural and historical construct. An interrogation of this genre is likely to reveal something about late medieval culture, its power relations, its discourse, its ideology. As with any text, what at first sight might appear to be a stable, fixed entity might also be a place where meanings are contested or resisted? That all subjectivity or identity is elided in all saints' lives in preference to a holy identity is not in question, but where this becomes particularly problematic is in the case of female hagiography; representations of saintliness become inextricably mingled with representations of ideal womanliness. Thus, what it means to be a female saint is not quite the same as what it means to be a male saint, for the code of sanctity which the hagiographer must incorporate into his story is subject to different expectations.

The arrangement of *Ethiopic* hagiographical writing is always chronological. A typical *Ethiopic* hagiography of the dynastic chronicle starts with the names and the native place of the subject and gives the basic information to place the subject in his/her relationship with his/her family. After that it tells how the saint was chosen to do the will of God. Then the biographical data are given which are constructed around an outline career. The skeleton of the saint's life is filled out by a variety of devices: formulaic passages, lengthy narrations of miracles and wonders performed by the saint as well as other writings which depict the physical description of the individual indicating his/her beauty both in appearance and personality. The story ends with the death of the saint, posthumous honors, eulogy and brief account of his/her descendants.

The *Ethiopic* female hagiographical style is that of a disconnected and episodic narrative. We do not find reflections of the relationship of an individual's story with historical or biblical circumstances, any considerations of influences (either the subject being influenced by apologists or the subject influencing history), or interactions with his/her milieu. *Ethiopic* hagiographies are usually descriptions of individuals seen as

members of a social or hierarchical group rather than accounts of individuals which consider personal developments and reflect upon their respective reasons and contexts.

The author supplements his narrative by introducing episodes and symbols drawn from the Old and New Testaments as well as standard hagiographic works. Thus the dearth of details about the birth of the saints resulted in stereotypical accounts whereby the saint was born to righteous parents, after a period of barrenness who received a prophecy of their child's future greatness, which was reaffirmed by signs and wonders at the time of his birth.

The approach that we should use to analyze the saint's life in Ethiopic hagiographical writing in my opinion could be called a functional approach, which seldom gives a hint of the personality of the saint spreading beyond his/her professional function. The hagiography, derived from the eulogistic writings of family cults, became in practice the imitation of those writings, concerned with only one aspect of the saint's life and almost exclusively concentrated on prominent people.

What are the medieval hagiographies then telling us about? It has been said that these descriptions do not tell only about the values of their writers, individual men of the Church, but convey the collective knowledge of the worldview and values of the entire society. Therefore, the writer of the saint's life can be considered anonymous, with a memory that reaches back over generations.

Thus, stories about saints do not so much describe independent individuals, but more correctly concepts of the higher ideals and holiness, morals and values of pious people. Being so, images of saints can be considered in their way as part of the collective consciousness, the worldview of the period. The view of the collective nature of hagiographic description has been accepted without reservation by several researchers of hagiographic description has been accepted without reservation by several researchers of the medieval period.

To answer the question whether the hagiography of female saints follows the same structure as that of male saints is very difficult. However, we can mention some of the features which are common to the stories. When examining the descriptions of these women, we learn that they are well-married, very beautiful, and educated. In comparison with stories, teaching and practices relating to men, those dealing with women usually focused on the women's bodies, especially their beauty and their fertility: when they become fertile (on set of menstruation) or officially able to breed (marriage), when they have produced evidence of fertility (birth). They are also depicted as pious, -so that people always marveled at their personalities. At this point, the first feature we observe regarding female saints is that they all came from wealthy families. Even after leaving their families, they remain wealthy. They did not seem to be deprived of their property as all the male saints were. A denial of worldly comfort is not so strictly adhered to. Sources recount tales of slaves in the monasteries and convents who helped nuns with the activities of daily life. The authors also opened the depiction of women saints with a very extensive genealogy. Most of them came from the tribes of Israel, and the parents of these saints were righteous and taught their children according to the law of God. They participated in the life that accompanies such a social position.

Another feature is that men saints are categorized, for the most part, as virgins, martyrs, priests, administrators, powerful men, confessors of the faith, teachers and so on. Women saints are never categorized as virgins but as mothers, and ones who pray a lot and receive revelations from God. The female saints become nuns only after having been married and after having become a mother; they all have children.

It seems that virginity does not play any role in becoming a holy woman; it was unusual for a woman to become a nun without having been married. This kind of discourse presents a terrible conundrum for Christian women. On the one hand, sexual activity is seen as tainted; (Fiqirte Kristos and Kristos Semra did not want to marry for they think that they will become unholy and Zena Mariam asked God to stop her menstruation so that she will become holy). On the other hand, Christianity presents women's fulfillment in terms of motherhood (see, e.g, 1 Tim.2:15<sup>2</sup> '...woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty'). Maybe the solution lies in the humanly impossible image of Mary, who is both virgin and mother. It is specifically mentioned in the text that all the female saints were married and had children. But we don't know much about their children or spouses in the narratives. Usually the younger child is taken by the angels to heaven so that the saint would not have to worry about him. It seems the storyteller intentionally kept them apart so as to give prominence to the saints. However, we sometimes do not see these saints act upon a task and take the initiative independently. They don't develop strategy on their own and execute a plan by themselves.

The rhetoric of these hagiographies dealt, above all, with recognition and associations. The literature has a tendency to present the pious behavior of these women characters as the paradigm of the behavior considered proper in the society. This kind of history was formed from models and symbols. The virtues of the hagiographies were born from the main character's struggles, which were either psychic struggles in the main character's conscience, or struggles with some external evil power

The hagiographies of Ethiopic female saints are not an entirely typical guidebook of war stories because they are written by widely utilizing the genre of the spiritual life. The martyr Fiqirte Kristos for example was the daughter of a rich and noble woman of Gondar. She was very beautiful, and being at the same time highly talented, she devoted herself to religious studies and so she became wise and learned. And it happened that the people held a festival in honor of their idols; and seeing the slaughter of animals, she was so greatly moved that she went to the King (Susenyos) and expostulated with him in these words: 'Why do you left the living God to worship lifeless idols?' But the Emperor caused her to be thrown into prison, and to be punished severely. After the servants beat her so hard, they beheaded her head. The moment they beheaded her, she bled blood, milk and water and then she died. However, the archangel, Saint Michael took her to heaven and showed her all those beautiful things for about twelve days and brought her to the place where she was beaten.

After she returned, the King ordered his servants to be brought, and bade them to reason with Fikirte Kristos, and confute her, threatening to burn them all if they should fail to overpower her. The orators, however, when they saw themselves vanquished, received baptism, and were burnt forthwith, while she was beheaded. In another scene, when Kristos Semra was praying fervently in her chamber, Jesus Christ, the King of Glory, appeared before her, clad in fine apparel and accompanied by a great throng of angels and saints. As testimony that he accepted St. Kristos Semra for his true follower he gave his thumb for her to suck and promised to perform great things for her if she would remain faithful in her love, and when our Lord Jesus Christ had disappeared she knew at once that vision was to be understood in a spiritual sense.

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<sup>2</sup> Holy Bible. *New International Version*. 1980. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

She was completely converted to a great divine love and reverent tenderness toward Jesus Christ. From this time on she often received great tasks of consolation from him, and in order that she might take comfort in him more fully she consecrated all her time and meditations to prayer. As formerly she had studied most zealously and had become learned, now, after her conversion she applied herself only to prayer giving to this her attention above all else. Hence, as I pointed out earlier, these narratives are not an entirely typical guidebook of war stories for they are written by widely utilizing the genre of the spiritual life.

As I noted, miracle stories are scattered widely in all categories of the biographies contained in hagiographic writings about Ethiopian female saints. This seems to indicate that these saints were almost invariably seen as bearers of the holy and possessors of supernatural powers. For example, we are told that the saint Kristos Semra stood with her head under water, and prayed for eight years without food and water. She is also depicted as a mediator between Satan and God. She is certainly described as a human locus of supernatural power. Having observed these kinds of scenes, we might want to say that women are the centre of their stories. However, before reaching to this conclusion, we should ask questions like: do we really see them vividly? Do we see them act and exercise their power? Do we hear their voices? The answer to these questions in my opinion is no.

Focusing our attention on this basic pattern, which appears to be found frequently in stories about the exercise of supernatural power by Female Saints in medieval Ethiopic literature, I want to try to speculate about the "function" of these saints, in a way similar to that in which Peter Brown has described the function of "holy women" in Byzantine culture. I would like to suggest that in the Ethiopians case, the saints might have helped to maintain the social order by providing what was understood to be emergency solutions to the crises that arose from its malfunctioning.

Under normal circumstances the virtue of the officials of this world and the power of officials in the other world, are believed to make certain that everything worked smoothly for example that rain came at the appropriate time. Unpredictable occurrences such as drought threaten the society by undermining the credibility of this entire symbolic order. This was the moment for the saints to step in: the saints were then requested to perform their miracles.

The possible scene which we find in the texts of these hagiographies is that we do not usually see most of the women in these hagiographies perform the miracles by themselves. There always is a male saint who comes out of the blue or there will be a supernatural intervention to help these women to perform the wonders. Otherwise they cannot carry out tasks by themselves. The women saints show fear when they are facing with something dangerous or difficulty. They do not confront the evil, rather they cry and pray. Because of this the angels always come to comfort and upraise their faith. On the other hand in the hagiographies of male saints the male characters are very much related with power and they are so capable of doing everything that they can to perform miracles by themselves.

Let me substantiate the above opinion with an example. In the hagiography of Kristos Semra, we are told that she tried to make peace between God and the Devil. In order to do this, what she finds it more convenient is to go to the Devil by herself and try to negotiate with him. So she went to the Devil and tried to have a word with him. When she did that, he came to her and tried to put her into the hell. However, the archangel Michael came right away to rescue her. In doing that, not only Kristos Semra,

but also thousands of souls were brought out from hell with him. Suddenly the subject becomes the archangel for he is the one who acts in that story. In my opinion this is basically the archangel's miracle not Kristos Semra's.

In another scenario, one day the archangel Michael appeared to Kristos Semra and gave her a task to build a church for him. But Kristos Semra refused to accept because she thought that she was a sinner and wicked person who did not have the ability to execute God's plan. Hence, the Archangel promised to be with her when she started to construct the church. After a long conversation, she agreed to build the church. But when the story continued we know that the church was not actually built by Kristos Semra. We read that the church was put up by a monk named Aba Yisihq who actually appeared in the story out of the blue. Suddenly the subject of the narrative becomes Aba Yisihq.

Then Aba Yisihq built the church with the help of the Archangel Michael. After he finished constructing, he blessed the church by bringing together all the monks, nuns and respected people. (Kristos Semra P.162) From this scene, we can observe that Kristos Semra is only mentioned to highlight the male character (Aba Yisihq) in the text or to bring some aspect of his experience more sharply into focus. Regarding male saints however, the case is different. Kaplan states the following:

The Ethiopian hagiographies portray the holy men as coming to the aid of their disciples and followers in a multitude of ways: driving out demons, healing the sick, warding off dangerous animals, resolving disputes and perhaps most importantly, intervening with God. .... They protected mankind from demons, illness, and wild beasts. (Kaplan; 1984: 70)

In her book of *Narratology* (1985), Mieke Bal proposes three methodological questions to guide the investigation of texts: who acts? who sees? who speaks? It will be helpful to keep each question in mind as analysis of the text proceeds. The answers to the second and third questions give clues about who tells the story. There is no sufficient evidence to say that the story of these women (saints) centre on a female character.

We must also note that they are typically the object, not the subject of perception; the story does not allow us to share their view. Nor do they have the reader's opportunity to narrate their own version of the story. Instead actions of other characters literally indicate the parameters of the story as the story progresses; what the other characters do shapes the narratives. In most of the women's stories, we see saints fighting in the court for their religion and faith with the emperor. As with the male saints, there is usually a conflict between the female saint and the emperor. For example, Fiqirte Kristos, Eyeluta and Walatta Petros defend their orthodox faith before the Emperor Susenyos who was converted to Catholicism.

On one hand, we should bare in mind the fact that the first initiative of the action comes from the king himself. The Emperor raises the issue of primarily first believing that his religion is the right one. Then, he begins confronting, punishing and sending people to prison who are against him. Thus, the female saints simply face the reality of being the victims of the punishment. However, when we come to the stories of the men saints, it is the other way round. It is the saint who first acts upon the wrongdoings of the king. For example, in Gedla Fillipos we read that he condemns the king (Amade Seyon) for marrying his father's wife.

On the other hand, when we invite Fiqirte Kristos and Walatta Petros to come to center stage and speak about the events of the story from their point of view, we

introduce a personal level to the story that is clearly not the main aim of its telling in the context of the book. In that context, they are political symbols for Ethiopia in its disintegration under a religious as well as political system that desperately needs a king to restore order.

From the above story, we can also learn that women came to the stage in order to give highlight and prominence to men characters. The text tells us that during that period, there was a Patriarch named Markus. He was well respected and faithful to his orthodox religion. He was not happy with the government because the king was Catholic in his religion. Hence, there was a terrible argument between him and the Emperor. One day, the Patriarch assembled the people and counseled them not to follow the false teachings of the Emperor. Then all men and women agreed to remain faithful to the orthodox religion. Among the people, Zera Kristos, the husband of Fiqirte Kristos was one. The story explains how he became the sacrificial victim for his faith. Following his footsteps, Fiqirte Kristos also gave her life (Gedla Fiqirte Kristos P.25-27). In this story, the key characters are the Patriarch Markus and her husband Zera Kristos. It appears to me that her story is narrated primarily to explain the works of the Patriarch.

We must also consider Bal's first question; who acts? The saints act decisively in a very few scenes. All the miracles that have been performed in the hagiographies are not being carried out by the female saints but by the angels or by the Lord. What the female saints do is simply praying or crying. Some of the ideas in the narratives confirm the fact that the saints have no role. Once the Lord Jesus Christ said to Kristos Semra:

You don't have that much power neither to ask such questions nor to perform a miracle. This is done by the archangel Michael.' (Kristos Semra, P.84:5)

Women saints are also depicted as arrogant and people who have no respect and lack wisdom. When they face the trial, or when they are asked about their faith, their answers are full of insult. When for example, Fiqirte Kristos and Walatta Petros were asked about their Orthodox faith, they insulted the king: 'At that time our mother Fiqirte Kristos insulted and cursed the Emperor' (P.34). Krisos Semra killed her maid because she thinks that she is offensive. In another scene, she wanted to punish her servant thinking that she ate her fruit. All these scenes portray women as people who lack wisdom. We do not see such kinds of ridiculous acts in the stories of male saints. Instead they are loving and caring. If somebody did something bad to the men saints, they will not curse that person rather they forgive him and pray for him.

It seems to me that, the primary reason for depicting women at the center stage is to give the reader the opportunity to see or hear them speak of their experiences and to make the reader accept and treasure their experiences as real and valid religion experience. In these texts, women are appeared at the center stage, but they are simply being used to achieve what are basically patriarchal ends. The fact that the stories are woven around women does not make them the heroines. Their role is always taken by men or supernatural powers. Therefore, it appears to me that although the women may be central to the action, they have a subordinate role in the texts. Kristos Semra is there to highlight the qualities of the monk Aba Yishaq and St. Michael, Fiqirte Kristos and Walatta Petros are there to illustrate a political problem. They are clearly the political symbols for Ethiopia that desperately needs a king to restore Orthodox faith. Hence, when women's experience is mentioned, it may have very little to do with an actual perception about women and far more to do with clarifying a perception about men.

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