



## **Feminist's Ethnography Use in the Teaching of Folk Studies in Higher Education. The Experience of Women's Storytelling Archive of University of the Aegean**

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### **Abstract**

*It is known that Ethnography is a multi methodical type of social research. Ethnography utilized by feminist science as the suitable type of research for the knowledge production which results from the use of the analytical category of gender and it focus in social realities of women, which the dominant academic research often ignored or misinterpreted. Social research and especially ethnography in any case they are not inherently feminists research methods. At the same time, during the exploration of women's lives feminist ethnographers understood that they could not lead to reliable conclusions if they ignore men's lives as the two sexes are in interaction and negotiation.*

*Folklore of gender has demonstrated that the most folklore researches lead to the conclusion that traditional communities consist mainly of men and the usual reference to women defines them as mothers or wives. Feminist folklorists are invited through ethnography to exceed the male orientation of mainstream research and through the study of the different categories of women in the same community or folk group they try to highlight women's real life situations, to make them visible, to hear their words, to value their contribution to society.*

*As life stories constitute a borderline (always feminist) meeting between researchers and respondents women, in the Faculty of Humanities of the University of the Aegean in the last eight years ethnographic researches of women's narrative around their reproductive experience (pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum) are in progress, with often shocking findings that deserve to be presented. The Archive includes approximately 1500 female narratives as well as 450 male narratives concerning their family experience.*

### **1. Introduction**

The ethnographic research is inspired and guided by feminist theories without of course its exclusion with other considerations' combinations. One of the major reasons of ethnographic's research use is the fact that the other theories ignore or underestimate the interactions between gender and strength [1]. At the same time feminist theories have contributed to the recognition of diversity among women and there are few feminists ethnographers who believe that they achieve on their research project the higher diversity degree between the women - participants of their research. Simultaneously feminist researchers understood that they could not brought to reliable conclusions if they continued to ignore men's lives since the two sexes are at interaction and negotiation all the time, particularly in the field of power and hierarchy. So, from the mid-80s, feminist ethnography began to study men and women, masculinity and femininity, noting a turn in investigation of identities' construction which related to gender and the study of gender relations [2].

### **2. Feminist Ethnography**

Among the research methods that ethnography utilizes we deserve to insist in life stories [3] because they constitute the marginal meeting point (always the feminist one) between the researchers and their participants which are always women. That's because life stories validate the female experiences, enhance communication between women, reveal the female past, form a sense of coherence and complicity internal gender [4] and that they produce new ethnographic material relevant to the lives of women and their female worlds. However and in this case there are a lot of feminists who are concerned with the kind of speech that mentioned in the narrative. What kind of speech is? Is the speech of the oppressed women? Is the speech of the valuation the original, non-silent female Self? Or are there multiple speeches? It is certain that female life narratives incorporate women in history and indeed in the local one and make their experiences part of it. Thus, from our point of view

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women's narratives as part of folklore studies contribute to women come out from the penumbra of traditional research, become fully visible as they are in reality, rather than as folklorists (both men and women) often think they are [5].

Folklore of Gender [6] enables the development of the analytical categories of power and strength, to the study of gender relations in the context of folk culture which enhances their historical dimension. These analytical categories are visible in the many aspects and especially they identified in sectors such as production, community structure and social reproduction [7]. Feminist folklore has revealed that most folklore studies lead to the conclusion that traditional communities consist mainly of men and the usual reference to the women defines them as mothers or wives. In our days when we review surveys and studies of the past we come to the conclusion that feminist folklorists can with the help of the analytical category of gender to approach women in traditional communities and particularly of those in which women are excluded from the ownership and production, as a symbolic capital [8] which is often closely connected with the institution of dowry. Also, in the most communities that have been investigated by folklorists, the biological reproductive role of women has been devalued significantly under the control of their husbands and their families. For a long period women operated as "men producers" which ensured to these "lucky" women social recognition and prestige. However, we do not claim that women were inactive victims of masculine traditional communities which they were members. On the contrary, in the context of folk culture their negotiating power becomes visible. They claim their place in the public sphere of the community's life and they decisively interfere in the formation and operation of community structures such as the communication networks of neighborhood structures [9] or the females' networks for the performance of religious duties.

### **3. The Experience of Women's Storytelling Archive of University of the Aegean**

At the Department of Preschool Education Sciences and Educational Design (T.E.P.A.E.S.) of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of the Aegean, an archive with women's stories exists and operates under the name "Archive 1570" – "Women's Narratives" relating to their reproductive experience (pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum) via the withdrawal of adult memory. In this Archive there are narratives of women who are over the age 80 years from the entire Greek territory, the most of them are rural residents and they had given birth outside maternity hospitals or other clinics and definitely without the help of a doctor.

These small Ethnographies carried out in the context of the course of Folklore Studies over the last eight years of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Before the design and the implementation of their research, which based on free discussion, students - researchers attend mandatory two courses in two different semesters: a. Ethnographic Research in Folklore Paces (winter semester) and b. Feminist Ethnography (spring semester).

The main goal of these researches is the recall and the highlight of gender reproductive experience that is formed during a usually "dark" and silent period of women's life which is covered from the study of customs, habits, symbols and rituals which relate with the process of reproduction. However, this period of women's life is closely associated with two marginal phenomena: The high percentage of infant mortality and the high also but "dark" percentage of maternal deaths. The female reproductive process, as shown from these surveys, has both gender and class dimensions. The vast majority of participants of these researches are women of the poorest rural classes since the wealthy women already by the 19th century had the opportunity or to go to the hospitals or to call a doctor to take care of them at home. It is worth to highlight some of the interesting findings of these researches and we must note that they present homogeneity despite their geographical diversification, as a sample of the widespread in Greek agriculture, a place that is dominant of patriarchal culture.

The first finding, to which researches converge, is that 90% of women participants had numerous rural occupations along with the responsibility of their household and their family. The second common finding is the traumatic way that the vast majority of women experienced pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum. This is something which denies the romantic approaches both of folk culture and of motherhood in its context. Some examples of the research findings are:

*«Πολύ δύσκολη ήτανε. Πολύ δύσκολη γέννα. Δυο μερόνυχτα κοιλοπονούσα στον πρώτο γιο μου. Μετά φωνάξαμε τη μαμή. Ήρθε η μαμή, . Ε, με τη δυσκολία, αλλά πάρα πολύ υπόφερα για να κάμω το παιδί. Δεν υπήρχανε ευκολίες εκείνα τα χρόνια, δεν υπήρχανε...»* (A woman describes how difficult she gave birth)

Several of the women narrators consider their marriage as a necessary but repulsive experience, particularly with regard to their sexual life. In some of the narrations the love relationship with the husband is determined by violence or the threat of violence. For example:



- a) “Λοιπόν, τον πρώτο καιρό πέρασα ωραία. Ε. μετά αρχίσανε οι δυσκολίες... Έπινε και λίγο. Ας’ τα, μην τα συζητάς τα άλλα. Δεν θέλω να τα... θυμάμαι. Δε θέλω να θυμάμαι [ξεφυσά]”. (A woman from the rural area of Central Greece reveals the difficulties in her marriage)
- b) “Δε συμφωνούσαμε σε πολλά πράγματα και ανακατευότανε πολύ και η μάνα του. Δεν είχαμε καλή σχέση... [δάκρυα]. Δεν υπήρχε του νου η επαφή, τίποτα. Εκείνος ήθελε συνέχεια... ξέρεις... Δεν τον ένοιαζε πως ένιωθα εγώ... αν ήθελα... με πόναγε. Υπήρχαν και καλές στιγμές, ελάχιστες όμως.” (A woman from the Leros island reveals the difficult relationship with her husband)

The third finding is that the 28% of women on the mainland who worked in agricultural operations gave birth alone or with the help of other women in fields or (in the case of fodder family groups) on during their journey to and from the “heimadia” (suitable place mainly in the lowlands of Greece to spend the winter shepherds with their flocks). In this field we have shocking descriptions not only the process of childbirth but also we have analytic one of the ways that women invented in order to cope with the difficulties and dangers that they faced. For example a woman from Western Greece mentions:

“Ήμανε τσ’ μέρες μ’, μα έπρεπε να μάσω ξύλα. Τ’ άλλο μ’ πιδί δεν είχ’ κλείσ’ τα τρία. Τι να ‘καμνα; Του πήρα μαζί μ’ κι ας έκαμνε κρύου. Εκεί π’μάζιβα τα ξύλα, σπαν’ τα νιρά. Αρχινίσαν οι πόν’. Κ’ ιγώ μαναχιά μ’ στου κάμπου! Σκιάχτα- δε σκιάχτα, δένω του πιδί σ’ ένα δέντρο, μη του χάσω, πάω παρέκ’, πίσου απ’ τα θαμνιά, κουντά στου ρυάκ’ κι γινάω μαναχιάμ’, γρήγουρα δόξα του Θιό. Άμα βγήκι του μικρό, κόβω μι του μαχαίρ’ του λώρου, κι απέ, δίνου μια σ’ κοιλιά μ’ μι τα δυομ’ χέρια να βγουν τα ύστιρα. Πουτάμια τα αίματα κι βρώμα. Βγήκι κι ου σάκουσ... Πήρα του μικρό, έτσ’ όπως ήτανε, κι του ξαναχώνου στου σάκου, να μη κρυώσ’, κι ας ήτανι ούλου αίματα κι βρώμης. Σούρνουμι στου ρυάκ’ κι αφού καθαρίστα κι συμμαζεύτα, βρέχου του μαντήλι μ’, γυρίζου πίσου, λεφτερώνω το νιούνιου, του σφουγγάω, του τύλιξ’ καλά-καλά σ’ μπέρταμ’ κι πήγα να λύσου του μιγάλο, πού ‘σκουζι όλ’ τν ώρα... Όχ’ μαμμή δεν είχι του χουριό μ’, μαμμή ήμνα ιγώ για με. Πάλ’ καλά!”

The fourth common finding is the ascertainment that the entire reproductive process progresses and completes in the interior of the gender as in most cases a female group helps during the process of childbirth and the days after the birth, but also and in cases of unpleasant complications (for example puerperal fever), joining folk healing practices with spells and ritual with religious content. This female groups usually comprised from the mothers of the bride and groom, neighbors and friends, however almost all the “lucky” women-participants who accepted the services of a midwife in their village refer to her with gratitude and also confirm that she was forming every time the “fertile environment”, fighting with the lack of medical care, without medical tools with only supplies her relevant folk knowledge and her craftsmanship.

We will close this paper with the most interesting finding that seems to exceed any divide between women and to shape a relationship of complicity, a conspiracy in the interior of the gender, pushed by the ethnographic research in the country of patriarchal “silence”: the interruption of an unwanted pregnancy (abortion). Not very often, but researchers encountered this phenomenon. The women who had the relevant experience, they testified that they find help to address their “problem” from persons of the same sex (usually elderly) and midwives.

#### 4. Conclusions

Ethnography is not an inherently feminist research. The fact that makes ethnographic research valuable is its use from by feminist researchers and the inclusion in this type of research of the analytical category of gender. Ethnography is equally important and for the enlargement and the democratization of modern folklore studies. Female narratives, in the context of the ethnographic research, act as links between personal experience, knowledge, local history and community life, which confirmed not only by the 1570 relevant female narratives, but also indirectly and from the 450 stories of men which will be our next activity.

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