HONORING CULTURE WHILE CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY:

FEMINISTS REINTERPRETATION AND REFOMATION OF

SHIMGILINA CEREMONY IN ADDIS ABABA

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Author's declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how urban, middle-class Ethiopians who identify as feminists engage with *Shimgilina*—a pre-wedding ceremony that, while deeply rooted in patriarchal tradition, remains central to Ethiopian marriage practices. The ritual often reinforces male dominance through male-only negotiations and, in rural contexts, is closely linked to child marriage. Yet, *Shimgilina* is also seen as a vital expression of cultural identity, a means of preserving heritage, and a way of fostering bonds between families. Amid these tensions, many feminist women and men still choose to include the ceremony in their marriage process. Given their relative privilege and autonomy, this participation is unlikely to stem from coercion. Instead, it prompts a more complex question: what forms of agency are being exercised within this deeply gendered cultural space?

Using qualitative research methods, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten self-identified feminists—nine women and one man—based in Addis Ababa. While participants shared similar social locations, they held divergent perspectives and strategies for navigating *Shimgilina*.

In analyzing these experiences, I drew on four theoretical frameworks—intersectionality, patriarchal bargaining, Nego-feminism, and Saba Mahmood's rethinking of agency—to trace how feminist agency is expressed within the Shimgilina ceremony. Two distinct patterns emerged. The first group expressed a strong sense of autonomy prior to the ceremony, particularly through independently choosing their partners. Influenced by this autonomy and by cultural expectations they embraced, they did not perceive Shimgilina as a site of struggle. Instead, they viewed it as a symbolic gesture—one that legitimized their personal choices in the eyes of their families, strengthened new relational bonds, and affirmed their cultural belonging.

In contrast, the second group did not articulate the same level of autonomy beforehand—not because it was absent, but because it was not felt or foregrounded in their narratives. For them, the ceremony itself became the key site through which to assert agency. Drawing on their feminist consciousness, they intervened more visibly—reshaping the ritual by including maternal figures, pushing for gender-inclusive representation, or challenging patriarchal norms embedded in the process.

Overall, this research reveals that agency within Shimgilina is shaped by culture, power, and a fluid sense of autonomy. Even within a relatively homogeneous group, expressions of feminist agency vary significantly, making the practice deeply contextual, yet plural and internally diverse.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Feminist Engagement with Tradition

"They were told to come early in the morning — by 5 a.m. — so that's when they showed up.

From my side, my uncles and the other male elders had already been asked properly if they would serve as my *shimagile*(elder), and they took it seriously. It's a role of honor. Even my father, when he's asked to represent someone else, always says, 'I was one of her *shimagile*,' with pride.

When the time came, things started to feel real. The men in my family — my uncles, male cousins, and the elders — began to gather. I quietly slipped away to my room, because that's what you're supposed to do. When they said it was almost time, I knew I had to hide.

Then the discussion began. They were figuring out what they would ask — and more importantly, who would speak. It had to be someone older, someone respected, someone who could speak well on behalf of our family.

Everyone dressed so nicely, from both sides. You can't just show up to something like this in a T-shirt and jeans. It's a big day.

When the elders from his side arrived, they were late. My side of the family teased them: 'How can we give you our daughter if you can't even show up on time?' they said.

Then the shimgilaes (elders) from the other side walked in— all men, dressed in tuxedos, standing motionless.

When they were invited to sit down, they said, politely, "Not yet — we have things to ask first." And so, they began. They told my family that their son is interested in marrying me. Then my family started asking questions:

'Who is he?' 'Who are his parents?' 'How is he planning to provide for her?' 'What property does he have?' They even asked about his behavior.

Since we're not from the same ethnic group, they didn't go too deep into lineage — but if we had been, I think they would have.

The elders from his side responded confidently. They said he was educated, had a stable job, and seemed responsible. 'He's a good guy,' they said. 'They'll support each other.'

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Then my parents added, 'She's educated, too.'

Finally, after some back and forth, someone from my side asked, 'If we give you our daughter, when will you arrange the marriage?'

And his side said, 'They will decide together.'

Only then were they given permission for their son to marry me, and they were invited to sit. Food was brought out, and the atmosphere began to soften.

I was still up in my room, hiding. People came in and out, whispering updates, telling me what was happening. They were taking pictures of me — I was the center of attention, even though I wasn't in the room.

Eventually, my mother and grandmother came out to be introduced, and then the women in my family began to serve the food.

That's how it happened." (Tsige, 28)

This vignette, drawn from a female participant's experience, outlines the core elements of a typical Shimgilina ceremony. While details vary, consistent features include the groom sending male elders, their central role in negotiations, the importance of familial approval, and symbolic acts of respect, such as elders refusing to sit before acceptance.

Although the ceremony reinforces male authority through practices like male-only representation, many feminist women and men in Addis Ababa still choose to include it in their marriage process. This study investigates why, focusing on how young, urban, middle-class both Ethiopians, like Tsige, negotiate and express agency within this gendered ritual.

1.2 Significance of Shimgilina and its gendered roots

To understand the significance of Shimgilina, it must be placed within its broader socio-cultural context. In many African societies, including Ethiopia, marriage is viewed less as a private, romantic union and more as a strategic alliance that serves family and community interests, primarily focused on procreation and the continuation of lineage (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023)As

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a result, the initial stage of marriage in Ethiopia emphasizes compatibility—especially in wealth, status, and religion—as families assess each other to uphold social norms and family honor (Mengesha, Deressa, and Imagnu 1996). Across Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups, the man's family typically initiates the process, followed by negotiations over timing, terms, and the exchange of gifts or bridewealth (Dessie & Bekelcha, 2023).

Despite its cultural significance, Shimgilina has received limited scholarly attention. It is typically mentioned only in passing within broader discussions of marriage and marriage ceremonies, which is framed as an expression of ethnic identity or cultural tradition, as noted in the literature review. As a result, Ethiopian scholars who do address *Shimgilina* tend to present it in a positive light, often emphasizing its role as a pillar of societal stability (Telila,2020) or as a means of cultural continuity(Beyene, 2006).

While marriage and its ceremonies are widely celebrated, rituals such as shimgilina often involve gendered practices that disadvantage women. In many traditions, it is men who initiate the marriage process (Telila, 2020; Beyene, 2006) fathers who arrange the unions (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023) and male elders or the groom's family, who lead the negotiations (Beyene,2006). These customs reinforce male authority and decision-making, leaving women largely passive participants in their marital arrangements. Furthermore, women are frequently treated as transactional objects in the form of bridewealth or dowry (Balew Liyew, 2024). Such practices significantly undermine women's agency by excluding them from critical decisions about their futures and delimiting their participation in economic activities.

This practice, deeply intertwined with cultural and ethnic identity, remains highly prevalent. As a result, many girls are married before reaching the age of 18, making Ethiopia one of the top 15

countries globally in terms of child marriage prevalence (Erulkar 2022). To make matters worse, these early marriage practices expose women to serious risks, including marital rape (Erulkar 2013) and heightened vulnerability to intimate partner violence (Abera et al. 2020).

The ceremony both celebrates communal cultural identity and reinforces patriarchal norms that have serious detrimental effects for women. For Ethiopian feminists planning to marry, this creates a complex tension between honoring tradition and challenging gendered structures.

The contradictions within Shimgilina are what initially drew me to this research—especially after attending the ceremonies of two close feminist friends. Their decision to include a ritual deeply rooted in patriarchy raised pressing questions: How do feminist values coexist with cultural practices that still marginalize and disadvantage women? Is participation in such ceremonies an act of agency or conformity? These tensions became the starting point for my inquiry.

This study explores how Ethiopian feminists engage with rituals like Shimgilina, which sit at the intersection of gendered power and cultural identity. I conducted interviews with ten self-identified Ethiopian feminists in Addis Ababa, all of whom are urban, middle-class, and educated who experienced the Shimgilina ceremony at a young age. The group included eight women who held traditional Shimgilina ceremonies, one who adapted the ceremony to her interest, and one feminist man who chose to send elders for his wedding.

Through their stories, I examine how feminism is lived not by rejecting tradition outright, but by critically engaging with it. Drawing on intersectionality, patriarchal bargaining, Saba Mahmood's concept of embodied agency, and Nego-feminism, this study shows how participants actively reinterpret or reshape Shimgilina from within.

The significance of this research lies in its effort to position culture not as an obstacle to feminism, but as a space through which feminist agency can be enacted. In the Ethiopian context—where tradition deeply shapes social life—this study challenges the assumption that feminism must stand apart from or against culture. Instead, it demonstrates how agency can be understood as relational and situated within a web of cultural norms, family expectations, and personal values. By recognizing these women's actions within their broader social context, the study offers a more nuanced, context-sensitive, and generative understanding of feminist agency.

This thesis is organized into seven chapters, each building toward an understanding of how feminist-identified Ethiopians navigate the *Shimgilina* ceremony and assert their agency. Chapter 2 provides essential socio-cultural context on Ethiopia's history, economy, gender relations, and demographics, situating participants within the broader structures that shape their agency. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative, feminist methodology—covering data collection, analysis, positionality, and limitations—and establishes the reflexive and intersectional-sensitive approach of the study. Chapter 4 reviews relevant literature, including Ethiopian studies on marriage customs, feminist research on child marriage, and global feminist work on wedding rituals. It highlights the absence of in-depth analysis on *Shimgilina* and situates the study within academic works that focus on wedding rituals and/or gender. Chapter 5 introduces the theoretical frameworks—intersectionality, patriarchal bargaining, Nego-feminism, and Saba Mahmood's theory of agency—that guide the analysis and support a contextually grounded reading of feminist agency. Chapter 6 presents the core analysis, showing how participants engage with *Shimgilina* in diverse ways depending on their social positioning and feminist orientation. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings and reflecting on their broader implications for feminist theory and cultural negotiation in Ethiopia.

2 Ethiopia in Context

2.1 History, Class, Gender, and Residence

This chapter provides a contextual overview of Ethiopia, outlining the socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics that shape gender relations and feminist negotiation. Ethiopia's anti-colonial history, diverse population, and strong traditions form the backdrop for understanding how Addis Ababa–based feminists engage with culture.
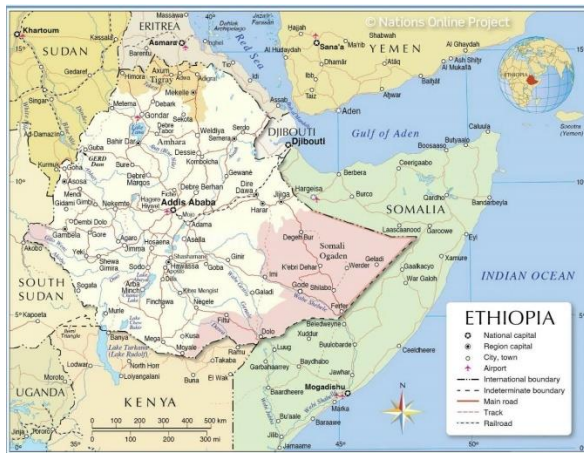
Figure 1: Map of Ethiopia and its neighboring countries

Ethiopia is situated in the Horn of Africa, in the northeastern part of the continent. As a landlocked nation, it shares borders with Sudan to the west, Eritrea and Djibouti to the northeast, Somalia to the east, and Kenya to the south. Its geographic closeness to the Arabian Peninsula has historically drawn the interest of European colonial powers. Nevertheless, Ethiopia has notably resisted colonization, successfully safeguarding both its sovereignty and its vibrant cultural heritage (Pratelli, 2019)—except for a brief Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941(King and Schramme 2019) .

This historical reality has shaped a distinctly Ethiopian philosophical outlook—one that values self-respect, national pride, and a deep commitment to safeguarding independence. Rooted in a legacy of resistance to European colonial invasion, this perspective embodies a spirit of sacrifice and sovereignty, often captured in the phrase **"ተፈርታ እና ተከብራ የኖረች ሀገር"**—a nation both feared and revered. (Hailu 2021).

Despite strong cultural continuity and a shared national identity, Ethiopia is marked by immense internal diversity. With over 80 ethnic groups and multiple religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and indigenous beliefs—the country is often described as a "museum of peoples," reflecting its rich mosaic of identities. The coexistence of unity and diversity in Ethiopia has been a complex and ongoing challenge. Under the imperial regime (pre-1974), national identity was promoted by suppressing ethnic and cultural differences, leading to widespread marginalization. The Derg regime (1974–1991) acknowledged diversity rhetorically but failed to ensure equitable inclusion. The current federal system, introduced by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, recognizes ethnic autonomy and self-determination. However, while it aims to protect cultural rights, it has also deepened divisions and contributed to recurrent ethnic tensions and political instability (Adamu 2013).

In terms of population distribution, Ethiopia remains one of the least urbanized countries in the world. Only about 16% of the population lives in urban areas, while the vast majority—around 70%—live in farming communities (King and Schramme 2019). Addis Ababa, often referred to as the "capital of Africa," serves as a political and economic hub, hosting major institutions like the African Union (AU), and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa UNECA. Its

diplomatic status, regional trade networks, and strategic role in air transport position it as a key site for the exchange of people, goods, and ideas—distinguishing it from rural Ethiopia (Gebrekirstoskassa, 2018).

However, despite Addis Ababa's prominence and periods of national economic growth, Ethiopia remains one of the world's poorest countries, with average incomes well below those of many other low-income nations.(Dorosh and Schmidt, 2010).

These structural economic challenges are compounded by deeply rooted gender inequalities. Ethiopia is a deeply patriarchal society, where women are often relegated to subordinate roles, with religion and culture frequently used to justify gender inequality—reinforced by legal and institutional frameworks. This has created significant disparities between men and women in nearly every aspect of life, from household dynamics to state representation. The status of women in Ethiopia remains critically low: they are more likely to live in poverty, have limited access to education, and often bear the responsibility of heading households without sufficient social or economic support. (Cherinet and Mulugeta 2003)

Even in sectors like agriculture, where women contribute significantly, their labor is often unrecognized and undervalued. While they may be central to family and community survival, women generally lack decision-making power in both public and private spheres. Globally, women outnumber men in many populations, but this is not the case in Ethiopia—partly due to the prevalence of harmful traditional practices. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), gender-based discrimination in food allocation, early marriages—sometimes as young as seven or

eight—rape, abduction followed by sexual violence, and other violations that impact women's health, autonomy, and overall well-being (Cherinet and Mulugeta 2003)

.Moreover, women are disappointedly affected by Poverty because they often lack access to financial resources while bearing household responsibilities. In rural areas, men are seen as primary providers, while urban women are overrepresented in low-paying jobs. Women also face longstanding barriers to land ownership and legal rights, with inheritance and property laws historically favoring men (Sande Lie and Mesin, 2018).

3 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Marriage ceremonies across cultures are more than celebratory rituals—they are powerful medium in which societal values are performed, contested, and reimagined. Across diverse contexts, wedding rituals often function as mechanisms through which gender roles and power structures are both produced and reinforced. Yet, they are also vibrant expressions of culture and identity—sites where communities affirm who they are, even as they navigate change.

In the Ethiopian context, *Shimgilina*—a pre-wedding marital negotiation typically initiated by the groom's family—is rooted in patriarchal traditions. While men customarily lead the process and women's agency is often absent or constrained, the ceremony also involves a symbolic exchange in which the bride is associated with material transactions, such as the offering of money. Nonetheless, it remains a practice through which culture is preserved, ethnic identity is expressed, and social bonds are formed.

In this study, I aim to examine how self-identified feminists in Addis Ababa navigate the tension between their cultural values and feminist commitments. While *Shimgilina*—a pre-wedding ceremony rooted in patriarchal norms—can reinforce harmful practices and limit women's autonomy, many feminists still choose to include it in their wedding process. By interviewing feminists who consciously opted to uphold this tradition, I explore how they express agency and

negotiate the complexities of honoring cultural identity while remaining committed to feminist ideals.

To help me understand this negotiation or "give and take," I draw on three bodies of literature. First, I engage with descriptive ethnographic accounts —often produced by Ethiopian male scholars using ethnographic and anthropological methods—that explore the historical and cultural significance of the *Shimgilina* ceremony across different ethnic groups in rural parts of Ethiopia.

Second, I turn to studies conducted in Ethiopia, most of which rely on community-based cross-sectional research or meta-analyses focused on rural areas. These works incorporate a gendered analysis by centering women lived experiences, allowing me to engage more critically with the patriarchal power dynamics embedded in such rituals. By examining these perspectives, I aim to better understand the more harmful and oppressive dimensions *Shimgilina* and its impact on Ethiopian women.

Third, I draw on global feminist literature on wedding rituals, which—though primarily focused on Western contexts—offers valuable insights into how gender is constructed and reinforced through tradition. These studies highlight the patriarchal symbolism embedded in ceremonies, as well as other intersecting systems at play, such as racism, capitalism, and class. While set in places like the United Status of America, United Kingdom, and South Africa, this literature informs my analysis of *Shimgilina* in urban Ethiopia, where gender, agency, and negotiation are similarly at play.

3.2 Marriage and its meaning

Each of the three scholarly bodies of literature approaches marriage through a distinct lens, shaping how they interpret the meaning and function of wedding rituals. While the first group tends to romanticize marriage and its ceremonies, another centers women lived experiences, and a third focuses on the symbolic elements of marriage to unpack underlying gender norms.

The descriptive ethnographic accounts frame marriage as a beneficial and highly respected tradition, situating it within a broader narrative that regards marriage as a foundational social institution. Accordingly, marriage is frequently defined as a union between a man and a woman (Kifle 2013; Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023) oriented toward procreation (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023) and upheld as a cornerstone of societal stability (Telila, 2020). It is also described as essential for cultural continuity (Balew Liyew, 2024).

As an extension of these values, *Shimgilina* and other marriage-related ceremonies are typically portrayed uncritically as rituals that uphold traditional norms and reinforce societal cohesion. In some accounts, *Shimgilina* is even celebrated as a cultural asset with the potential to contribute to tourism and national economic development (Tătar et al, 2024). The ceremony is also framed as a medium for expressing ethnic identity (Beyene, 2006), facilitating bonds between families (Worku Kalore, 2019), and preserving communal customs (Telila, 2020). In certain cases, it is promoted as an intangible cultural heritage to be protected and supported by regional cultural and tourism departments, given its cultural significance and economic value for both the families involved and the broader community (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023).

Additionally, this conceptualization of marriage as a beneficial and essential social institution tends to focus on documenting—and, in many ways, celebrating—how various ethnic groups in Ethiopia perform the ceremony, rather than critically examining or challenging its underlying assumptions. As a result, these scholarship papers, often focuses on cultural symbolism within marriage rituals. Among the Hadiya, elders bring honey in a clay pot to signify kindness (Worku Kalore, 2019); in Arsi Oromo tradition, a *siinqee* stick is placed at the bride's door to begin courtship (Telila,2020). In the Amhara region, a successful first meeting leads to a formal invitation called *ketero* for further negotiation (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023.).

On the other hand, scholars who critically engage with the gender component in the ceremony do not consider it "as a way of life", but rather as a key mechanism in perpetuating child marriage among girls. By shifting the analytical lens from the ritual itself to the lived experiences of the girls involved, the language used in the literature changes significantly—those previously referred to as "brides" become "child brides and the institution of "marriage" is reframed as "child marriage" (Abera et al. 2020; John et al. 2019).

For this group, these rituals are understood as arranged marriages initiated by parents, often without the girl's consent (John et al. 2019). These arrangements are often framed as beneficial, either for the family or even for the girl herself. The logic of the arrangement lies in the motivation and desire to strengthen family ties (Abera et al. 2020; Kok et al. 2023), to protect girls from perceived threats such as premarital pregnancy—which could bring shame and dishonor to the family (Kok et al. 2023)—or to shield her from Gender Based Violence (Abdurahman, Assefa, and Berhane 2022). In many cases, those most likely to be married off through these arranged

ceremonies are young girls who remain under the full control of their parents, with little to no say in the decision (Erulkar 2013; Gebeyehu et al. 2023)

Alongside Ethiopian scholarship that either critiques *Shimgilina* as a site of gendered harm or romanticizes it as an expression of ethnic/national identity, global feminist literature offers a different lens—one that focuses on the ritual itself as a performative space where power and gender are enacted. Studies on the Western style "white wedding," reveal how rituals reproduce patriarchal norms through symbolic acts that position women in passive or subordinate roles (Ellingsæter 2023; Froschauer and Durrheim 2019)

3.3   Wedding ceremonies as sites of gendered performance

The three bodies of literature I engage with each approach gendered performance in wedding rituals from distinct perspectives. Ethnographic and anthropological studies tend to describe visible roles—what men and women do during the ceremony. By contrast, scholars that problematize the ritual, focus on underlying dynamics such as age disparities and the broader consequences of these cultural practices for women. The third group, rooted in global feminist scholarship, analyzes symbolic performances tied to capitalism, gender, race, and other intersecting structures of oppression.

In the descriptive literature, gender roles appear in various ways across different ethnic groups— particularly in accounts that highlight how the marriage process is typically initiated by the man or his family. Often, the groom provides money, informs his father, or has male elders sent as

representatives on his behalf. Again, these observations remain largely descriptive and normalize gendered power dynamics.

In the Arsi Oromo context, for example, it is described the young man identifies the girl he wants to marry and informs his father, who then contacts someone from the bride's family (Telila, 2020). In other cases, such as in east Gojjam, when there is a close relationship between families, a betrothal marriage may be arranged directly by the fathers of the bride and groom—a practice described as both common and respected (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023). It is also often the groom's parents who are responsible for selecting a "suitable bride" for their son (Augustyniak 2009;Beyene,2006). Among the Hadiya, although the full arrangement process is not always clear, three men are typically sent to the bride's home to formally request the union (Worku Kalore, 2019). Even in historical accounts, such as among the Afar Islamic community in the 10th century, it is the man who approaches the bride's father with special gifts to initiate the request (Augustyniak 2009)

Across many ethnographic accounts, the premarital negotiation phase is presented as a central moment for the exchange of bride wealth and dowries (Balew Liyew 2024; Tătar et al. 2024) However, these practices are often described as routine or culturally normative, with little critical attention given to their implications or consequences.

In many cases, if the bride's parents are open to marriage, they receive money or goods as part of the agreement. Among the Hadiya, for example, the groom's family gives 200 euros to the bride's father and 100 euros to her mother (Worku Kalore, 2019). In Amhara marriage practices, bride

wealth is typically paid in either cash or kind. It is usually the boy's father who provides the payment to the bride and her family. In return, the bride's father gives an ox or sheep to the groom's father. The bride herself is often gifted with gold. These exchanges are framed to stabilize and secure the marriage arrangement (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023). In the Gidda Oromo tradition, a specific form of marriage arrangement known as *Hawi* also involves gendered economic exchange. In this case, the boy asks his father to negotiate on his behalf. If the negotiation is successful, the father provides his son with money to buy clothes, shoes, and an umbrella for the bride (Beyene, 2006).

Women are largely absent from the narratives presented in much of the ethnographic literature on *Shimgilina*. When these ceremonies are described, women are either overlooked entirely or presumed to have consented to the marriage. The accounts often center the man's agency: he decides to marry, informs his father, and male elders are sent as representatives. In contrast, women are neither visibly present in the ceremony nor granted decision-making roles in the literature. In many cases, it is unclear whether women are allowed to accept or refuse the marriage proposal. In one account, a girl is described as "encouraging," with her best friends acting as intermediaries to communicate her feelings to the groom's family (Telila, 2020). Even in the exchange of wealth, men dominate the process, and it reinforces the idea that women are commodities that are being bought from their fathers. Moreover, even in the cases that they receive money, the bride or even her mother receives significantly less. As an example, I gave earlier, when the bride's father receives 200 euros, the mother 100 euros, while the bride herself receives nothing(Worku Kalore, 2019). Similarly, in Amhara traditions, the groom's family provides livestock to the bride's father, while the mother is given only clothing (Dessie and Bekelcha, 2023).

Scholars who critically engage with gender component in the Ethiopian context of *Shimgilina* highlight power imbalances often overlooked in descriptive accounts. This literature interrogates decision-making dynamics, where the man's role in choosing and paying for a bride is closely tied to age and authority. They highlight that such arrangements are widespread in Ethiopia: 58% of women marry before the age of 18, compared to only 9% of men. In extreme cases, particularly in the Amhara region—marriage promises are reportedly made even before a girl is born(A. M. Dessie et al. 2023).

A key concern is that man's older age and financial control create a harmful power imbalance, limiting the younger bride's autonomy and reinforcing a hierarchical relationship (John et al. 2019). Moreover, age is closely tied to age. They show that girls who marry at or after age 18 are significantly more likely to participate in household decision-making, while those married earlier often have little to no agency over their lives (Abera et al. 2020). In some instances, girls married before age 15 are not even aware of the marriage until the arrangements are already underway (Eruklar, 2013). These early and often one-sided unions strip girls of power from the outset, placing them in highly vulnerable positions (Abera et al. 2020; John et al. 2019).

The literature highlights that the consequences of early marriage extend far beyond the wedding ceremony, with deeply harmful and lasting effects on girls and women. The consequences of early marriage are extensive and profoundly damaging. Child brides are often subjected to marital rape during their first sexual experience (Erulkar 2013) and face a significantly higher risk of enduring spousal abuse and domestic violence throughout their marriages (Abera et al. 2020). Moreover, the lack of agency not to choose a partner initiated contributes to patterns of violence and

undermines trust, intimacy, communication, and the overall quality of the relationship (John et al. 2019).

Global feminist scholarship examines pre-wedding and wedding ceremonies by analyzing the symbolic systems, language, and gendered performances that are woven into the rituals themselves. The engagement ring is viewed as a symbol indicating that a woman is "taken" (Baker and Elizabeth, 2013), or even as a form of partial payment (Froschauer and Durrheim 2019). Ritual moments such as the bride being "given away" symbolize the history of women being married off without their explicit consent (Froschauer and Durrheim, 2019), the groom "asking her father" for permission gives her father authority over her, or the entitlement to "kiss the bride," which reflect institutionalized gendered power imbalances(Fairchild 2014). The white wedding dress symbolizes purity and virginity, reinforcing cultural ideals of feminine innocence (Froschauer and Durrheim,2019; Fairchild2014).

Further critiques focus on the wedding industry as a powerful site where patriarchy and capitalism intersect. The role of a woman in weddings is shaped to serve the capitalist system. She is told to be picture-perfect, so the bride goes to great lengths, engaging in unhealthy diets, costly beauty treatments, and exhaustive self-preparation, to embody the ideal (Dewandaru and Triastuti 2021). Popular culture portrays wedding as the pinnacle of a woman's life and her opportunity to become a temporary celebrity, encouraging excessive consumption (Baker and Elizabeth, 2013). These dynamics are driven the "wedding industrial complex," where gendered expectations are not only reproduced but monetized through the collaboration of media, tradition, and market forces (Dewandaru and Triastuti, 2021)

Moreover, Bridal media further promotes this narrative by placing the responsibility of wedding planning and emotional labor squarely on women, framing unpaid care work as part of the bride's role (Carter 2022). Scholars problematize this dynamic by pointing out that men's contributions, such as proposing, often require significantly less effort and planning. In fact, the emotional labor expected of a proposal is frequently minimal, likened to simply saying "Happy Birthday". Meanwhile, women are expected to plan the wedding, organize events like prom, and manage family gatherings. This reflects a broader patriarchal division of labor, often described as the split between "frontstage" and "backstage" performances. While grooms may appear to take initiative, they are often following their fiancée's detailed instructions—maintaining the illusion of male leadership in line with social expectations. Couples frequently navigate these roles in ways that feel authentic to them, while still conforming to societal norms (Schweingruber, Anahita, and Berns, 2004)

Beyond gender, this body of literature also addresses other intersecting forms of oppression, such as class and race. It highlights how white weddings often reproduce idealized notions of femininity that are deeply racialized and classed. The "ideal bride" is frequently portrayed as white, middle-class, and hyper-feminine. Cultural narratives—such as the "bridezilla" trope—serve to discipline women who deviate from these expectations, especially working-class and non-white brides, who are often depicted as excessive, unruly, or insufficiently feminine (Carter , 2022).

3.4 Gendered Agency in Marriage Proposals: Absent, Constrained, or/Both Commercialized?

In the descriptive ethnographic accounts, it often remains unclear whether women could agree to or refuse a marriage proposal. Only in one instance, the girl is described as "encouraging," with her best friends communicating her wishes to the groom's side (Telila, 2020). In the Ethiopian scholarship that problematizes gender, women's agency is portrayed as either absent or severely constrained. Parental authority dominates the decision-making process (Gebeyehu et al. 2023), with marriage decisions typically made by the parents rather than the girl herself (John et al. 2019). In some cases, girls younger than 15 may not even be aware that they are getting married until the process is already underway (Erulkar 2013).

In global feminist discourse, there is a more nuanced conceptualization of agency, particularly in relation to marriage proposals. Despite significant advancements in gender equality—such as increased female participation in the workforce, gender-neutral legislation, and evolving norms around domestic labor—certain patriarchal rituals, like the tradition of men proposing, remain largely unquestioned by women (Ellingsæter 2023). Female-initiated proposals are often seen as less legitimate, and women themselves sometimes pressure their peers to get married, even in contexts where feminist ideas and systemic gender progress are widely embraced (Baker and Elizabeth, 2013).

This apparent contradiction, scholars from this group argue, is partly due to the privatization of choice: acts like accepting a proposal or planning a wedding are framed as personal decisions, thereby shielding them from feminist critique (Ellingsæter 2023). Moreover, the rise of "choice

feminism" supports this framework, suggesting that any decision a woman makes—whether to wear makeup, stay home, or plan an extravagant wedding—is valid as long as it is freely chosen. As some scholars in this group contend, the emphasis on the individual often suppresses political debate. It is merely seen as critiquing a choice is seen as attacking a woman's agency (Carter 2022). Other scholars have this contradictory phenomenon, as an influence of the wedding industry, which markets femininity as a commodity to fulfill a woman's desire to belong to society. This creates an emotional relationship between women as consumers and the rituals of marriage. As such, personal agency becomes entangled with market-driven ideals, making feminist resistance more complex in the symbolic world of weddings (Dewandaru and Triastuti, 2021).

3.5   Shifting tradition: Between preservation and reinterpretation

In the descriptive ethnographic accounts, *Shimgilina* is portrayed as a fixed and unchanging tradition, simply a part of life, leaving little room for negotiation or reinterpretation. It is presented as a rigid expression of identity, rather than something that can be changed. Similarly, the other group within Ethiopian scholarship does not critically examine the ritual itself or consider it as a potential site for negotiation. Instead, proposed solutions tend to focus on protecting girls through structural interventions, such as implementing community-based programs to keep girls in school (Erulkar 2013) and increasing women's decision-making power in rural areas (Gebeyehu et al. 2023).

Global feminist literature often frames tradition as flexible, layered with contradictions, and open to negotiation. While these scholars reflect this view through varied frameworks, they consistently emphasize how individuals and couples do not simply follow fixed cultural paths. Instead, they navigate between personal values and social expectations, adapting rituals in ways that resonate with their lived realities. For example, when traditional gender norms—such as the bride vowing obedience—clash with egalitarian ideals, couples may revise their vows to reflect equality while still preserving other patriarchal elements, like the father giving away the bride (Fairchild 2014).

Moreover, scholars in this group critique simplistic classifications such as "resisters" or "maintainers," arguing that they fail to capture the nuanced ways people engage with tradition. Within a single relationship, individuals may hold contradictory views or selectively adapt different aspects of various rituals (Ellingsæter 2023). Tradition, from this perspective, is malleable—constantly reshaped through reinterpretation and everyday practice. Concepts like detraditionalization and bricolage are used to describe how people integrate modern values into traditional forms, not by rejecting them entirely but by reworking them to fit new meanings (Carter and Duncan, 2017).

While each body of literature offers valuable insights, significant gaps remain in understanding the gendered dimensions of marriage rituals like *Shimgilina* in Ethiopia. Ethnographic and anthropological accounts tend to be descriptive, often portraying culture as fixed and focusing largely on rural settings. These works rarely engage with questions of power, gender dynamics, or the possibility of change within tradition. Critical gender scholarship in Ethiopia, on the other hand, offers important analyses of patriarchy and the structural oppression women face—especially in

relation to child marriage and rural life. However, this body of work often overlooks the ritual itself as a potential site of negotiation and meaning making, even in contexts where the woman has given consent and is older than eighteen years old, educated and living in an urban setting. Meanwhile, global feminist literature provides robust frameworks for analyzing agency, symbolism, and negotiation within wedding rituals, but it lacks attention to the Ethiopian context, particularly the complex interplay of class, culture, and race.

While the reviewed literature provides important insights, it remains limited in capturing the nuanced dynamics of gendered agency within the Shimgilina ritual. Descriptive ethnographies often portray the ceremony as a static cultural tradition, lacking attention to the evolving power relations it entails. Ethiopian gender scholarship has primarily centered on child marriage and structural patriarchy, offering limited analysis of how adult women engage with marriage customs. Meanwhile, global feminist literature presents rich critiques of weddings and symbolic gender performances, but these discussions are largely grounded in Western contexts and do not engage in Ethiopia's cultural specificities.

To address these gaps, this study draws on interviews with Ethiopians who identify as feminists and are middle-class, urban, and educated. Their narratives form the basis for a more situated analysis of gendered agency. The next chapter introduces the conceptual framework guiding this analysis, which draws on intersectionality, Nego-feminism, patriarchal bargaining, and Saba Mahmood's theory of embodied agency. Together, these frameworks provide a lens to explore how feminist Ethiopian women negotiate tradition, autonomy, and power within the complex terrain of marriage rituals.

4 Conceptual Framework

This chapter presents the conceptual framework guiding this study, which draws on four key theoretical approaches: Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining, Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism, and Saba Mahmood's rethinking of agency.

I selected these frameworks for their critical stance toward the universalizing tendencies of western mainstream feminism. Together, they provide a lens through which to analyze participants' experiences of gendered oppression while also recognizing the culturally and historically specific

4.1 Intersectionality

The first theory I draw on is Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes that identities are interconnected, and systems of oppression overlap in ways that cannot be understood in isolation. Developed through her work on domestic violence against women of color and immigrant women in Los Angeles, Crenshaw's notion of structural intersectionality shows how gender-based violence is compounded by race, class, and imigration status. For instance, the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act required immigrant women to remain with their spouses for two years to qualify for residency, forcing many black women to stay in abusive relationships. Language barriers and economic dependency further exposed them to intersecting forms of racism, sexism, and classism (Crenshaw 1991).

Crenshaw argues that oppression is not additive but interlocking, producing unique forms of marginalization—such as racism experienced by Black women that differs from men of color and sexism that is different from white women. She critiques traditional single-axis approaches for overlooking these complexities and distorting our understanding of both racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989)

Building on Crenshaw's insights, I use intersectionality to demonstrate that the participants in my study cannot be understood solely through their gender. Broad and generalized categories such as "woman," "third World," or "feminist" fail to capture the complexity of their identities. Instead, it is necessary to examine their lived realities more closely, with careful attention to other kinds of identities that can reflect the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape how they navigate the world. In this regard, I consider factors such as age, class position, urban residence, and national identity in addition to gender as essential dimensions of analysis. These categories allow me to better understand how intersecting systems of power shape both the constraints my participants face and the forms of agency they express.forms of resistance they enact.

4.2 Patriarchal Bargaining

The second theoretical framework I draw on is Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of patriarchal bargaining, which provides a valuable lens for understanding the interplay between women's oppression and their forms of resistance. Kandiyoti argues that patriarchy is not a universal or monolithic system; rather, it takes on distinct forms across different cultural and historical contexts. Recognizing this variability is crucial, as it allows us to identify the specific "rules of the game"

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that shape the strategies—or *bargains*—women make within patriarchal structures (Kandiyoti, 1988).

To illustrate her argument, Kandiyoti identifies two broad models of patriarchy: Sub-Saharan African patriarchy and classic patriarchy, while acknowledging that lived experiences are more nuanced. Classic patriarchy—common in South and East Asia and many Muslim-majority societies—is marked by patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, and male dominance within the household. In such contexts, women are often married young and transferred from their natal homes to their husband's family, where their subordination is maintained through legal, religious, and familial institutions (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Kandiyoti's framework has been instrumental in analyzing the experiences of marginalized women who are often perceived as lacking agency or not engaging in negotiation. However, her concept of "patriarchal bargaining" reveals that many women do exercise agency in subtle and strategic ways.

For example, research from Kenya shows that some women use silence as a tactic to protect their reproductive autonomy. Akini, a 28-year-old woman, chose not to inform her husband about her decision to use contraception, stating, "*It will be my little secret.*" In doing so, she reclaimed a degree of control over her body and reproductive choices (Gatwiri and Mumbi 2016). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, women navigate patriarchal marital systems by engaging in contractual negotiations. Some include clauses in their marriage contracts to ensure their husbands will not interfere with their education(Alwedinani,2017). These examples demonstrate how women work

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within patriarchal constraints to assert their autonomy—seeking to influence change from within rather than through overt resistance

I believe Kandiyoti's analytical framework is particularly useful for analyzing the feminist who held the ceremony for two main reasons. Firstly, the Ethiopian context shares many characteristics of classic patriarchy. As outlined in the literature review and background section, Ethiopian society is largely patrilineal and patrilocal, with male-headed households and high rates of early marriage. These structural dynamics are compounded by women's economic marginalization, including limited access to formal employment, land ownership, and financial resources—factors that often make women dependent on male relatives or spouses for financial security. Even the Shimgilina ceremony, the focus of this study, reflects these patriarchal dynamics. It places decision-making power in the hands of male elders—usually the father or senior male relatives—reinforcing gender hierarchies within the marriage process. Secondly, as we have seen in the examples I put earlier, this theory is particularly useful in contexts where women are not typically perceived as having agency, yet in practice, they engage in subtle and strategic forms of resistance or negotiation.

I use patriarchal bargaining as an analytical lens to interpret participants' actions during *Shimgilina* and marriage more broadly. While some choices may appear conformist, this framework encourages a deeper look at what women gain through such decisions.

Given that my participants are urban, educated, middle-class adults, *Shimgilina* may not function as purely oppressive. Their social positioning allows for a degree of agency, prompting questions such as: Why do these feminists choose to participate? What do they stand to gain?

4.3   Nego Feminism

The third analytical framework I use in this study is Nego-feminism, a distinctly African feminist approach that offers a culturally grounded lens for understanding gender relations. Coined by Nigerian scholar Obioma Nnaemeka in 2004, Nego-feminism—short for "negotiation feminism"—emphasizes the importance of negotiation, compromise, and community-based strategies over confrontation. It draws from African knowledge systems, lived experiences, and indigenous modes of resistance, making it particularly relevant for analyzing gender dynamics within traditional rituals like *Shimgilina* (Nnaemeka, 2004).

Nego-feminism emerges from a broader pool of African feminist thought, which challenges the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism. Unlike Western models that often frame gender struggles as inherently adversarial, African feminist frameworks—such as Nego-feminism, African womanism, and motherism—emphasize social harmony, relational agency, and the inclusion of men in gender justice efforts. For example, African womanism seeks collective rehabilitation by involving both men and women across diverse social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Opara 2024).

This intellectual tradition also critiques the imperialistic and culturally detached approaches of European feminist scholarship. Scholars like Sylvia Tamale argue that Western feminism often "*speaks for*" African women, reinforcing colonial tropes and denying them agency (Byrne 2020). Other African scholar also notes that African women are frequently portrayed as powerless and dependent on external interventions, rather than as active agents shaping their own transformative agendas (Musingafi 2023).

By anchoring this study in Nego-feminism, I aim to foreground Ethiopian women's culturally embedded strategies of resistance and negotiation, offering a decolonial, context-sensitive analysis of how agency is enacted within marriage rituals.

As previously noted, the foundations of Nnaemeka's nego feminism theory is her critique of dominant feminist frameworks that emerge primarily from Western contexts. She argues that such theories are often disconnected from the lived experiences of African women and lack both cultural relevance and practical applicability. In fact, she labels these approaches as performances of intellectual prestige—what she refers to as "intellectual gymnastics"—rather than as tools for liberation and social transformation. In response, she proposes Nego-feminism: a feminist theory grounded in the logic of African life, focused on the now, and reflected in proverbs, oral histories, storytelling, and community-based ethics (Nnaemeka 2004).

Nnaemeka draws on what she terms the "history of now" to theorize from African ways of knowing and knowledge production, emphasizing that they are rooted in the present. She argues that the present moment can reveal both the origins and the evolution of these knowledge systems. This orientation allows her to build on indigenous foundations and ground feminist theorizing in the lived, everyday experiences of African women—in the now, in what they are doing (Nnaemeka 2004).

Building on this foundation, Nego-feminism not only foregrounds negotiation as a form of agency but also reclaims African culture as a vital and evolving resource for feminist theorizing. Rather than viewing culture as inherently oppressive, Nnaemeka encourages scholars to see indigenous

knowledge systems—including cultural practices—as legitimate and generative grounds for theory-building for development. She warns against the wholesale rejection of culture in feminist analysis, emphasizing that although certain practices may be problematic, culture itself is dynamic, continually reshaped by those who live it (Nnaemeka 2004).

I chose this framework because my participants did not completely reject the Shimgilina ceremony, despite its patriarchal dimensions. Instead, they engaged with it in complex, give-and-take ways. Moreover, this approach enables me to focus on their actions in the present—the "history of now"—and to recognize their lived experiences as valuable sites of theorizing and giving them the chance to speak for themselves. Lastly, this framework treats culture not as inherently oppressive—as some strands of Western feminism tend to—but as indigenous ways of knowing and allows for a more complex understanding of culture beyond its patriarchal elements.

4.4   Agency Conceptualization

The fourth framework I draw on is Saba Mahmood's (2001) rethinking of agency. In her essay Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent, Mahmood critiques the dominant feminist assumption that agency is inherently tied to resistance. She challenges the liberal feminist emphasis on autonomy and negative freedom, arguing that agency can also be expressed through self-cultivation, devotion, and adherence to religious norms. Drawing on Foucault's concept of subjectivation—which emphasizes that the same systems that constrain us also shape our identities and capacities—Mahmood contends that if agency is understood as a capacity for action shaped by structures of subordination, it is not solely about fostering resistance or change. Rather, agency

can also be exercised through practices that uphold continuity, stability, and adherence to established traditions (Mahmood 2001).

She supports this argument through ethnographic research with women involved in the mosque movement in Cairo, demonstrating that agency can be expressed through intentional acts of submission and self-discipline. By cultivating practices such as wearing the veil and embodying the virtue of piety, these women do not passively conform but rather actively shape themselves as docile subjects within a religious framework. Through this process, they engage in ethical self-formation—deepening their connection with God and fostering harmony between body, mind, and soul. Mahmood argues that such practices exemplify a form of agency that takes the form of deliberate and conscious docility (Mahmood 2001).

Moreover, Mahmood underscores that many feminist analytical frameworks are deeply rooted in colonial histories and warns against the uncritical application of Western theories to non-Western contexts. To illustrate this, she engages with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, emphasizing that repeated actions are interpreted differently depending on context. For the Egyptian women she studied, the repetition of religious acts—such as veiling and practicing shyness—is a way to align the body, mind, and spirit in the pursuit of virtue. Success is measured by achieving spiritual and ethical coherence through disciplined practice. In contrast, Butler views gender performances as inherently unstable, arguing that failure in repetition reveals the constructed nature of gender itself (Mahmood 2001).

For Mahmood, this theoretical reframing—and the distinction between Western and non-Western contexts—is crucial, as it challenges the tendency to prematurely dismiss or look down upon religious and traditional practices as inherently devoid of agency. By focusing exclusively on resistance, feminist scholarship risks ignoring how individuals actively produce meaning, negotiate values, and engage in ethical self-formation within existing social and cultural frameworks. This perspective is essential for developing more nuanced, non-dogmatic feminist scholarship that is attentive to context and diversity (Mahmood 2001).

I use Mahmood's conceptualization of agency to emphasize her argument that agency is neither universal nor fixed. Rather, it is shaped by the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which it unfolds. Accordingly, the participants in my study must be analyzed within their own specific contexts—including cultural norms, family dynamics, and personal histories—which shape distinct identities, desires and inform how they engage with questions of feminism, autonomy, and negotiation. To deepen this analysis, I build on additional theoretical frameworks that collectively illuminate how agency operates within these layered contexts.

Drawing on intersectionality, I examine how overlapping systems of power—such as gender, class, and culture—interact to shape participants' desires, identities, and capabilities, with particular attention to the influence of tradition and ceremonial practices. Patriarchal bargaining offers a lens through which to explore what participants seek to gain within patriarchal systems, reframing their actions not as passive acceptance but as active, strategic negotiation. Most importantly, Nego-feminism positions these negotiations as forms of relational give-and-take, emphasizing that culture is not simply a site of constraint but a space of feminist possibility. It allows for the

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balancing of conflicting desires and the development of feminist agency that is embedded in, rather than detached from, local cultural practices.

5 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of feminists in Addis Ababa who chose to include the Shimgilina ceremony as part of their wedding. The aim is to uncover the nuanced forms of negotiation and agency embedded in their personal stories and decisions. To do this, I conducted semi-structured interviews, a method that encouraged participants to speak openly while allowing me the flexibility to follow up on emerging themes and insights.

As scholars have noted, semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for capturing participants' unique perspectives, as they balance structure with flexibility, allowing the conversation to evolve organically in response to emerging themes (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021)

5.1 Data Collection

Given the relatively small number of self-identifying feminist women in Addis Ababa—particularly those who have had the Shimgilina ceremony—recruiting participants for this study required a multi-pronged approach. Since feminism in Ethiopia is an emerging concept, and is often associated with urban, educated, young, middle-class women, adding a criterion of having experienced Shimgilina further limited the pool.

Nonetheless, I began recruitment with individuals from my personal network, including friends and colleagues who had experienced the Shimgilina ceremony—two of whose ceremonies I had attended. While this provided a few participants, it was not sufficient, so I used snowball sampling and expanded outreach through personal connections and online feminist spaces. This approach was helpful as snowball sampling is particularly effective in contexts where the target population is small and not easily accessible (Naderifar, Goli, and Ghaljaie 2017). Even then, participation remained limited, so I shared calls for participants in a women-only WhatsApp group focused on information sharing and opportunities, as well as in Addis Powerhouse, a young feminist advocacy platform. Some respondents were former collaborators from feminist projects, while others were new connections. In total, I recruited eight participants through this process.

Initially, my criteria focused on feminist-identifying women who had participated in Shimgilina. As recruitment progressed, I broadened the scope to include one woman who adapted the ceremony to her interest, but still who had been deeply involved in a family negotiation, and one feminist man who had chosen to send elders for his wedding, bringing the total to ten.

The semi-structured interview followed a two-part section. The first part focused on collecting personal background information, including age, gender, religion, education, nationality, profession, and place of residence, as well as how participants identified as feminists. This information allowed me to analyze their experiences through an intersectional lens and to contextualize their stories, negotiations, and expressions of agency within their broader social identities.

The second part of the interview consisted of open-ended questions accompanied by prompts. As scholars note, a semi-structured interview guide typically includes core open-ended questions along with follow-up probes to help the interviewer explore emerging themes throughout the conversation (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021). Thus, I asked participants how they defined the *Shimgilina* ceremony, what their decision-making process entailed, how their ceremony unfolded, whether they attempted to change any aspects of it, and their reasons for doing so or not, with probing questions when needed

The Interviews were held in flexible, participant-selected settings to ensure comfort and privacy. These included homes, cafés, and co-working spaces. In some cases, interviews were conducted in domestic environments where participants juggled conversation with me along with caregiving responsibilities with their kids, while others took place more casually over coffee. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. I took notes on my notebook and recorded conversations using my phone. The interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Amharic. I transcribed and translated all recordings into English.

5.2   Data Analysis

For data analysis, I used thematic analysis, starting with repeated readings of transcripts to identify key phrases and patterns. This process revealed two participant groups: those who reinterpreted Shimgilina and those who aimed to reform it. This method proved valuable for capturing the complexity of participants' experiences, as it facilitated a comparative lens through which both shared narratives and contrasting viewpoints could be analyzed (Nowell et al. 2017).

5.3 Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, informed consent is understood as an ongoing process of building trust between the researcher and participants. It involves providing enough information without overwhelming participants, while respecting their right to freely choose whether to take part in the study (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden 2001). To uphold this, I shared a written consent form—detailing the study's purpose, methods, duration, and confidentiality measures—with most participants before each interview, along with the guiding questions. At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated these points verbally, assuring participants of their right to skip questions or withdraw and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities.

Due to the sensitive political and cultural climate in Ethiopia, I intentionally avoided questions related to ethnicity and chose choose not to explore topics related to sexuality, for safety and ethical reasons.

5.4 Positionality

To reflect on my positionality as a researcher, I draw on feminist scholarship that highlights how our social location shapes research, relationships with participants, and knowledge production. As emphasized by *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*, acknowledging positionality is key to ensuring transparency and reflexivity throughout the research process (Jackson et al. 2024).

Guided by this approach, I reflect on key feminist questions about my relationship to the research topic and participants, the power dynamics shaped by my social position, and how these should be

represented. These reflections have shaped my reflexive practice and informed my role in the study (Jackson et al. 2024).

I am Kalkidan Asmamaw, a 28-year-old Ethiopian woman, born and raised in Addis Ababa. I speak Amharic, identify as a feminist, and am currently pursuing a master's degree in Gender Studies at Central European University. Although I am unmarried and have not personally undergone the Shimgilina ceremony, I am closely familiar with the cultural context in which it is practiced.

Over the past years, I have attended multiple Shimgilina ceremonies—dressing in coordinated outfits, celebrating with friends, and sharing congratulations on social media—I am part of the world where this tradition holds meaning. I also share key social characteristics with most of my participants: we are urban, educated, feminist Ethiopian women(of a similar age. In qualitative research, such shared identities often define an "insider" positionality, enabling ease, trust, and openness in the interview setting (Bukamal 2022).

However, insider status is never fixed. As scholars note, "all cultures (including subcultures) are characterized by internal variation," and insider/outsider lines are often blurred remained (Merriam et al. 2001).While I shared much with my participants, key differences still remain.

First, although we all lived in Addis Ababa, we came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As discussed in the literature review, ethnicity in Ethiopia often carries distinct cultural meanings and practices, including variations in how marriage rituals like Shimgilina are understood and

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performed. These differences, while sometimes subtle, shaped both how participants narrated their experiences and how I was perceived.

Second, my affiliation with a European academic institution introduced a layer of epistemic authority. My role as a researcher—particularly one trained in feminist theory abroad—sometimes positioned me as a bearer of external or "Western" knowledge. This complicated the horizontal nature of the research relationship. In some cases, my background as a gender studies student seemed to shift the dynamic; I was seen as an "expert," and a few participants appeared to seek validation from me. These moments made me acutely aware of the power I held in shaping the conversation. In response, I tried to make clear that this was their story, and they were the experts of their own lives and choices.

Conversely, with a few participants, especially those who were older or more professionally established—I sometimes felt unsure of myself or hesitant to assert my role. In these instances, my identity as a younger researcher positioned me differently. This was further reinforced by differences in life stage: some participants were already married, had children, or were managing family life, while I remain unmarried. I occasionally sensed that participants were adjusting their narratives—either to include me or to explain decisions they assumed I might not fully understand.

These shifting dynamics revealed that my positionality was not static. At times I was perceived as a peer, as an outsider, a student, or a presumed expert. I navigated these roles throughout the research process, recognizing that insider and outsider positions are always relational and fluid.

5.5   Limitations

One key limitation of this study is the specificity of its participant group. All interviewees were urban, highly educated, and middle-class individuals based in Addis Ababa. As a result, the findings reflect the perspectives of a relatively niche demographic—feminist-identifying individuals with access to certain social and economic resources. This focus, while intentional, limits the generalizability of the study to the broader Ethiopian context. In particular, the experiences and negotiations of women from rural areas, lower-income backgrounds, or with limited access to formal education may differ significantly from those captured here.

5.6   Methodological tools

5.6.1 Feminist Methodology

I position my work within feminist methodology not simply because I interviewed women, but because of the decisions I made regarding method, methodology, and epistemology. In terms of methods, I drew on conventional qualitative tools, such as semi-structured interviews, listening, and observation. However, following feminist methodology, what makes this study feminist is my effort to identify emerging patterns of recognition and meaning-making in feminists narratives (Harding, 1987). Existing research on the *Shimgilina* ceremony rarely analyzes it through a gendered lens in the way that I do. It is typically framed in a polarized understating either in discourses of child marriage or understood as a celebrated cultural tradition. My approach, by contrast, centers on the gendered performances, acts of resistance, and expressions of agency demonstrated by feminist women who *consented* to participate in the ceremony. Through this lens,

I aim to uncover the nuanced complexities of their agency in cultural settings moving beyond simplistic interpretations of acceptance or resistance.

5.6.2 Intersectionality as a Method

My central argument is that self-identified feminists choose to include Shimgilina as part of their wedding, and this choice should be understood as a complex, context-specific expression of agency. However, their actions cannot be fully understood without considering the context and their intersecting identities, which inform both the nature of the oppression they face and the forms of resistance they employ.

As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argues, gender discrimination cannot be examined in isolation from other social categories such as race and class. These systems of power intersect to produce distinct and compounded forms of marginalization. Crenshaw emphasizes that relying on a single-axis framework obscures the complexity of oppression, resulting in what she calls "a distorted analysis of sexism" (Crenshaw, 1989, 140). Therefore, to fully understand how sexism operates and manifests within a specific context, it is essential to incorporate these intersecting dimensions into our analytical frameworks. Moreover, this way of analyzng identities is crucial in exploring how oppression is challenged, or when it is being accepted.

To lay the groundwork for my argument, I will first use intersectionality, not just as a theoretical framework but as a method as well. I applied intersectionality as a research method by intentionally asking about categories beyond gender, starting with the questionnaire. Following Helma Lutz's (2015) call to "*ask the other question*"-that is, to always consider which additional axes of power

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are at play (Helma Lutz 2015), I tried to move beyond merely identifying sexism to also examining how class, age, and other intersecting factors shape my participants' experiences. When something appeared sexist, I asked: *Where is class in this? Where is the race in this?* My goal was not to treat these categories in isolation or mention them superficially, but to explore how they interact and co-construct the realities my participants navigate.

Another way I incorporate intersectionality as a method is by paying close attention to how participants themselves highlight specific aspects of their identity while narrating their experiences. Do they emphasize their gender, age, ethnicity, or national identity? When do these identifications surface, and in what context? This approach is also inspired by Helma Lutz, who reminds us that identity is not fixed or uniform—it shifts across different contexts and situations, and must therefore be examined as fluid, relational, and shaped by varying social dynamics (Helma Lutz 2015).

As noted in the earlier section of the methodology, I focus on five key dimensions: age, gender, class, urban residence, and national identity. Before exploring how these categories intersect, it is important to first understand what each of these identities represent individually, particularly within the context of this study and especially regarding in marriage ceremonies. This allows for a clearer analysis of how they interact and shape the negotiation strategies and expressions of agency among my participants.

5.6.2.1 Gender

Nine of the ten participants in this study are women, with one male participant as the exception. In the Ethiopian context, being a woman often involves navigating structural disadvantage within a socio-political landscape shaped by persistent gender inequality and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. On a global scale, Ethiopia ranks 173 out of 188 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, highlighting critical deficits in reproductive health, empowerment, and economic participation (Wright, 2020.). Local data reinforces this picture: according to the 2016 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey, 63% of women and 28% of men believe that wife-beating is justified under certain circumstances (Kelecha et al. 2024). In the interviews, all participants spoke about the oppressive systems they face highlighting the women part of them is often oppressed

Tigist, a 28-year-old radical feminist who specializes in gender and media, said that

> "Ethiopia is very traditional when it comes to gender roles. You can't be radical here—I can't exist in this community. You can't get married, make friends, or have a relationship. You can't even get a job." (Tigist, 28)

Participants also expressed forms of resistance in response to these oppressive structures, especially by trying to influence others around them. For instance, Soliyana, who is a female researcher and development worker, told me that

> "I always challenge the patriarchal assumptions of my family—even my mom and siblings. Sometimes it's just when we're watching TV and an ad comes on, and I point out what's wrong with it." (Soliyana, 34)

5.6.2.2 Nationality

Secondly, all these participants are Ethiopian —a designation that, I argue, carries significant meaning. As discussed in the background chapter, Ethiopia's legacy of resisting colonization and its emphasis on cultural continuity have shaped a powerful national discourse rooted in pride, tradition, and self-reliance (Hailu 2021; King and Schramme 2019). Within this context, culture transcends mere practice; it symbolizes sovereignty deeply embedded in anti-colonial narratives. Consequently, marriage ceremonies such as *Shimgilina* serve not only as familial rituals but also as affirmations of social continuity and cultural resilience (Dessie & Bekelcha, 2023)

This sense of cultural continuity is reflected in the participants' narratives, particularly when they explained why they chose to engage in the Shimgilina ceremony. Their accounts reveal that the ritual holds a deeper significance beyond the act itself—it is embedded in their understanding of identity and belonging. One participant stated, "I initiated it because my mother and aunts went through it," positioning her decision within a matrilineal tradition. Others referred to Shimgilina as "our culture" or described it as "the way you introduce him to the family," signaling a collective identity rooted in Ethiopian or ethnic heritage. These expressions suggest a strong sense of communal affiliation—a "we" that participants feel part of and wish to preserve. Thus, for some of the participants, their engagement with the ceremony, therefore, is not just personal but also a meaningful affirmation of cultural continuity and national identity.

That said, it is important to acknowledge that Ethiopia's anti-colonial legacy, while preserving local traditions from direct colonial interference, has not led to a unified national culture. Instead, Ethiopia is home to over 80 ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs, and cultural

practices. This diversity—compounded by ongoing ethnic tensions and political instability—has made ethnic identity a dominant framework of social belonging (Birhan, 2024). Given this context, it is likely that references to "we" in participant narratives may also reflect ethnic belonging rather than national identity. However, because I intentionally avoided asking about ethnicity due to its sensitivity, I have chosen to interpret "we" in terms of national identity for this analysis. Ultimately, it is important to recognize that cultural practices such as *Shimgilina* are not merely traditional rituals but also serve as potent expressions of cultural sovereignty and/or ethnic identity.

This conceptualization of culture offers a powerful means of self-expression, and connection with the older generation. However, it is also a space where gendered power relations and social hierarchies are reproduced. While many participants expressed a strong sense of cultural belonging and appreciation for tradition, they simultaneously sought to challenge or transform certain aspects of the ceremony. Their efforts, however, were often constrained by the intersecting pressures of gender and culture/ethnic identity—factors that frequently work in tandem to suppress or delegitimize young feminist voices within these cultural contexts.

Tsige, a 28-year-old consultant working in the gender sector, was determined to include women in the ceremony by having them sit on her side of the family. However, her request was denied by her parents. In response, she turned to her fiancé's family and asked if they could at least include a woman among the elders."As she recalled firmly: *"I asked my husband's older sister if they could include a woman among the elders, and she flat-out said, '[X ethnic] men don't do that.' After that, I just stayed quiet."*

This example shows that Tsige was actively seeking a space to assert her voice. However, her attempt was unsuccessful, as she was challenging a cultural practice deeply tied not only to expressions of ethnic identity but also to the ways in which certain ethnicities construct and perform masculinity. Furthermore, the fact that she was a young woman—and that her husband's older sister held more authority due to age—further undermined her efforts. Confronted with these significant obstacles, she ultimately felt compelled to remain silent.

5.6.2.3 Capital City Residence

All the participants reside in Addis Ababa, which I believe is closely linked to their high level of educational attainment. This urban residence reflects a certain degree of social advantage. Historically, in the Ethiopian context, as more young people gained access to education and migrated from rural areas to urban centers, their autonomy and life choices expanded. For young women, moving to urban cities and education enhanced their decision-making power in terms of marriage. Moreover, Western influences at urban areas introduced new social spaces—such as school plays and sports activities—where young people could meet and form relationships in their own terms. These changes not only facilitated the incorporation of Western elements into cultural practices but also created opportunities for young women to exercise greater agency (Mengesha, Deressa, and Imagnu 1996).

This broader context helps explain why participants in this study viewed their own Shimgilina ceremonies as evolving cultural expressions, not solely due to their feminist perspectives, but also because of their exposure to their urban residence. They often drew the line between urban/rural, traditional/modern, and past/present

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Soliyana, who is based in Addis Ababa, reflected on the evolution of the ceremony:

> "Historically, the ceremony involved family negotiations without the woman's knowledge or consent. But today, it's more of a symbolic step for acknowledgment and blessing, rather than a strict requirement." (Soliyana, 34)

Tigist, who was born and raised in Addis Ababa, emphasized the shift in agency between the modern and traditional: "*In the modern sense, the woman chooses who she wants to marry.*"

Moreover, Tsige, who had her Shimgilina after reaching an agreement with her husband, noted:

> "Traditionally, the woman is not involved in the process, but in the urban context, both the man and the woman agree beforehand." (Tisge, 28)

Participants often distinguish their own *Shimgilina* ceremonies from past, traditional, or rural versions by framing theirs as modern, urban, and the present. While they acknowledge that in other contexts *Shimgilina* may occur without the woman's consent, they emphasize that their participation involved mutual agreement and personal choice. This reinterpretation reflects not only their awareness of structural inequalities but also their active role in reshaping cultural practices to align with their values and lived realities.

5.6.2.4 Class

Another key aspect of the participants' identities that affords them a significant advantage is their middle-class status. All of them identify themselves as in the middle class and nearly all of them hold master's degrees or higher and work as professionals in roles such as consultants, researchers, and program managers within both local and international NGOs. This positions them firmly within Ethiopia's middle class—a considerable level of privilege when compared to the broader

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population of women in the country. As discussed in the literature review, most Ethiopian women have limited access to education and live in conditions of poverty.

5.6.2.5 Age

Age is a crucial factor in assessing the bargaining power of my participants. In shaping the Shimgilina ceremony, they were often negotiating with parents and "elders" who were significantly older than they were. This generational gap inevitably constrained their ability to assert influence. Especially in Ethiopian society, older individuals are generally seen as bearers of wisdom, experience, and authority, especially when it comes to the preservation of cultural traditions. They are typically entrusted with upholding such practices, which further reinforce their dominant role in decision-making (Kassas, and Tessema, 2019). In contrast, the participants in my study were relatively young at the time of their ceremonies, most of them in their twenties, with the oldest being 31. This age disparity played a meaningful role in shaping the dynamics of negotiation and agency.

5.6.3 Feminism in Context: Intersecting Realities of Ethiopian Feminists

Due to their identities that are context-shaped and the nature of the intersection. I believe it is crucial to approach this group with careful consideration. For instance, we cannot analyze them solely through frameworks that prioritize gender as the primary axis of oppression, as radical feminism often does (Rowland and Klein 1996), as such an approach overlooks the complexity of their lived realities. In the Ethiopian context, gender intersects in distinct ways with poverty, religion, postcolonial identity, and ethnicity—dimensions that are not fully addressed by theories rooted in countries like the United States, Germany, or France (Rowland and Klein 1996). As a

result, analyzing gender oppression and resistance without accounting for these intersecting factors risks flattening the nuanced ways in which Ethiopian women navigate both their oppression and their cultural traditions.

To offer a more specific example of the contrast between radical feminism and the interests of Ethiopian feminists, radical feminism calls for a total transformation of social structures and often views the elimination of patriarchal practices as essential(Rowland and Klein 1996). However, for women in Ethiopia, the reality is more complex. Although there is no formally articulated framework of Ethiopian feminism, the data from this study show that none of the participants expressed a desire to eliminate the *Shimgilina* ceremony.

Mare, who did not assign a specific label to her feminism but felt most aligned with African feminist perspectives, explained:

> "It's about who we are, and we should continue it. If it doesn't have a real negative implication, it's actually a positive thing—you know, it's about making the elders happy, making your parents proud, and taking pride in the ceremony. But we should completely abolish it if the couple can't give consent." (Mare, 38)

Soliyana, who identifies as a radical feminist, similarly articulated a vision of transformation rather than elimination: *"Even in the future, if I have kids, of course the father will be involved—but so will the women in her life.*

Whether they identify with African or radical feminist perspectives, these women still express a desire to preserve the ceremony. As the interview excerpts suggest, they do not seek to discontinue it. While they offer critiques, such as the need for consent and greater inclusion of women—they

do not advocate for its abolition. For many, the ceremony represents a form of cultural identity, or simply something so deeply embedded in their lives that they cannot imagine removing it.

This example helps a potential disconnect between dominant feminist theories and the lived experiences of feminists in Ethiopia. Most participants did not identify with established academic categories such as radical, liberal, or African feminism. Instead, they framed their views through personal experience and everyday struggle. When asked, the only widely recognized feminist figure they mentioned was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Eden who is a 29 year old told me that:

> "Growing up, I used to get punished because I didn't obey when they ordered me around, saying, 'You're a girl.' I used to fight with my brothers—I didn't like to lose anyway. Then, when I got to university, I realized how bad it is for women, and I started calling myself a feminist." (Eden, 29)

Fatima, who learned feminism from the strong women in her life:

> "I didn't really know there was such a big problem when it comes to gender equality because the women who raised me didn't tell me as such. It was only when I joined university that I realized that there is a problem with being a woman." (Fatima, 30)

The feminists in my study did not arrive at their feminism through alignment with major theoretical frameworks such as radical feminism, poststructuralist feminism, or even nego-feminism—many of which I was not familiar with before beginning this academic journey.

Instead, they theorize from their everyday lives—through their interactions with others, their personal struggles, and the realities they navigate daily. The For example, Eden's feminist awakening was closely tied to her exposure to new discourses during her university years, while Fatima traced her feminist consciousness to the strength and wisdom of her mother and

grandmother. These narratives exemplify the practice of theorizing from lived experience, where personal and intergenerational insights inform broader critiques of gendered power structures.

Accordingly, this research intentionally grounds its analytical approach in the lived experiences and meaning-making practices of these Ethiopian feminists as a continuation of their feminist journeys. Rather than imposing dominant feminist frameworks developed in different socio-political contexts, I draw on theories that create space for and incorporate the ways in which participants themselves narrate, negotiate, and embody their feminist commitments. In doing so, this study contributes to a contextually grounded articulation of Ethiopian feminism—one that emerges not from abstraction, but from everyday struggles, strategies, and acts of resistance, thereby contributing to the participants' own conceptualizations of agency.

6 Navigating Tradition:

The Emergence of Two Feminist Approaches to

Shimgilina

This chapter presents the core analysis of my research, examining how self-identified Ethiopian feminists in Addis Ababa engage with the Shimgilina ceremony—a traditional, patriarchal pre-wedding practice. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks introduced earlier, I explore how participants negotiate the tension between feminist commitments and cultural expectations. Their narratives reveal that agency is not expressed solely through resistance, but also through adaptation, negotiation, and cultural embeddedness.

While the participants share common social positions—such as age, gender, nationality, class, and urban residence—their approaches to Shimgilina vary significantly. For some, agency was rooted in the freedom to choose their partners, reducing the perceived need to challenge the ceremony itself. For others, Shimgilina became a site of active negotiation, prompting efforts to reshape its structure and meaning.

I argue that both approaches represent valid forms of agency. Each participant navigates his/her struggle in ways that reflect her lived experience and the tools available to him/hers

6.1 Reinterprets: Making Feminist Sense of Tradition

> "As long as I made sure they couldn't say no to me about who I am going to marry, it was fine. It's what tradition expects, and from what I saw when my aunt got married, it was a source of great pride for the family, so I wanted to honor that." (Eden, 29)

Rather than challenging the structure of the ceremony, participants from this group chose to engage with it in its existing form. The following analysis explores the reasons behind this approach and the actions that accompanied it. I argue that their decision not to change the ceremony should be understood as a strategic and agentic choice, shaped by their sense of autonomy, the cultural value they attribute to the ceremony, their privileges, and the dynamics within their families.

6.1.1 Feminist Critique by Reinterpreters

> "It's usually men who sit and ask the questions. Even in my case, it was my uncle and my dad who did that." (Eyerus, 38)

The participants in this group, many of whom explicitly identified as feminists, were quick to recognize the patriarchal dimensions of the Shimgilina institution. Their awareness extended beyond gendered power dynamics, allowing them to critically examine other intersecting systems of oppression, such as ageism and classism.

This depth of analysis can be attributed, in part, to their backgrounds as highly educated professionals in Addis Ababa, many of whom work in the fields of gender, human rights, and social justice.

Petros, a 41-year-old man currently pursuing a PhD at a prestigious international university, had his own *Shimgilina* approximately a decade ago. During the interview, his engagement with the

ceremony felt emotionally distant; rather than reflecting on his personal experience, he spoke more about how things are, offering a detached, systemic, and analytical account of the ceremony. I believe he was drawing more on his academic training than on his lived experience during our interview.

Nonetheless, his reflections offered a critique of both the gendered and class-based dimensions of the ceremony. He emphasized that Shimgilina is not only patriarchal but also deeply shaped by class hierarchies, particularly through its focus on the financial capability of the groom. I believe his positionality as a man enabled him to critique both the pressure placed on men within this system and how men may perceive their wives because of this tradition.

He acknowledged: *"Even men from disadvantaged and underprivileged backgrounds might struggle to marry or be with a woman they love because of traditions like this."* At the same time, he was critical of how these practices harm women as well, stating: *"This arrangement is also bad for women—he might end up seeing her as furniture that he paid for."*

Petros had his Shimgilina at a time when urbanization and globalization had not yet significantly influenced the ceremony. Reflecting on more recent developments, he emphasized that Shimgilina is not a static tradition but one that is gradually transforming. He cited a recent example of a ceremony organized entirely by women and widely circulated on social media—an event he described as *"shocking."* At that moment, he explained, it prompted him to reflect on the gendered language embedded within the tradition critically. He pointed to the asymmetry between the term shimagile—a title reserved for elder men and associated with wisdom and respect—and arogete, the supposed female equivalent, which he noted is often used in a dismissive or derogatory manner.

Eden, a 29-year-old university graduate who lives in the capital city with her husband and is currently working multiple jobs, spoke with firmness when I asked whether she had any objections to *Shimgilina*. Rather than relying on formal education—she mentioned she had no academic background in feminism—Eden drew on her empathy and everyday feminist sensibilities, noting that she learned much of her feminism from Ethiopian TikTok. In her response, she was visibly empathetic toward the girl she was describing as being affected by the ceremony. She focused sharply on the woman's experience within the tradition, portraying it as a process in which the bride is rendered passive and victimized. "*She's not consulted*," Eden said. "*She's targeted. Others have already decided for her—and the next thing she knows, she's a wife.*"

In Eden's case, she initially viewed her experience as more modern. Laughing, she remarked that she wouldn't even let her parents choose something minor on her behalf. With a smile, she added, "So why would I let them choose something this big?" However, as the conversation shifted toward a critique of *Shimgilina*, her tone became more serious—she grew increasingly reflective and critical.

Similarly, Abigael, a 33-year-old who holds a master's degree in human rights from a foreign university, spoke about *Shimgilina* in a very structured and analytical way. She focused on how the ceremony gives power and visibility to men. "*Elder men are the ones who ask the questions,*" she said, also pointing out that *"it's always the man who sends elders to propose."* For her, these actions are not just traditions, but ways that men show and confirm their authority. She explained that if a woman were to start the ceremony herself, it would be seen as disrespectful and would make the man look weak. "*No one would agree to go,*" she said. Throughout the interview, Abigael used terms like "*agency* and *masculinity"* to describe how the ceremony is built to support male power and keep women in passive roles.

These reflections reveal that the ceremony is not accepted uncritically. Participants recognized that *Shimgilina* operates within a patriarchal system in various ways—one that legitimizes male authority, objectifies women, and limits their agency and representation.

For Petros, his male positionality allowed him to focus on the pressure placed on men to demonstrate economic capability. And this is accurate, as research shows that bride wealth is often part of the *Shimgilina* ceremony (Balew Liyew 2024). Eden, on the other hand, centered the experience of the woman who lacks agency in the process. She refers to cases in which parents decide without the girl's consent (John et al. 2019), often to strengthen their families (Abera et al. 2020), or to protect her from premarital pregnancy or gender-based violence (Abdurahman, Assefa, and Berhane 2022) For Abigael, the core issue was the structural power granted to men within the ceremony, which is in line with global literature that critiques the authority given to fathers or male figures—such as giving the bride away (Froschauer and Durrheim 2019), or the groom asking the father for permission (Fairchild 2014).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that participants did not problematize the gendered labor of their female relatives, who were typically responsible for preparing food and managing logistics. All of them mentioned that it was the bride's female family members who served food to the elders after the ceremony, yet none identified this as an issue. This recurring pattern reflects a broader theme observed in global feminist conversations, but not in this research in the Ethiopian context (Schweingruber, Anahita, and Berns, 2004).

6.1.2 Social Bonds and Cultural Legitimacy: Rewriting the Rules of Shimgilina

> "It was important to them, and I wanted to respect that. That is why I had the ceremony. By that time, my father was no longer around, and I wanted my mother to have the same

respect, even without him. I didn't want her authority in the family to be negated." (Abigael, 33)

Abigael, for example, while critiquing the ceremony for perpetuating gendered power structures, also acknowledged its potential to foster social bonds, grounding her argument in an indigenous understanding of marriage and authority. As she explained: *"When two people get married, their families also come together to make future decisions—like about the wedding."* She also shared that while her sister had received Shimgilina when their father was still alive, her ceremony took place after his passing. In this context, she used the ceremony to affirm her mother's authority within the family.

> "I participated in Shimgilina to build a good relationship with my in-laws and because my partner wanted it." (Petros, 41)

For Abigael, the decision was easy. However, for Petros, it wasn't a straightforward choice. He mentioned that all his friends had done it and that no one he knew had ever skipped the ceremony. This made him feel pressured to go along with it. As he said, *"I have been conscious about these things for the past, I don't know 10-15 years. I never came across my circle. I have never met someone who did not do it."* There was a quiet anxiety underneath—he didn't want to be the one who broke from what was expected. For Petros, taking part wasn't about agreeing with the tradition, but about keeping peace with his partner, building a good relationship with his in-laws, and fitting in with what everyone else was doing.

Eden, who described *Shimgilina* as a form of arranged marriage, still recognized its emotional and symbolic value. "*When a man respects you, he also respects the people who shaped you,*" she said, explaining how the act of sending elders can be seen as a gesture of love and respect, not just toward the bride, but toward her entire family. I believe this interpretation was rooted in her experience observing her cousin's ceremony from beginning to end. She recalled how, during the

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event, the groom's elders were made to wait outside before being invited in and receiving an answerable moment she described as symbolically powerful. "*It highlights the value of your womanhood*," she reflected. For Eden, these gestures, though deeply embedded in patriarchal structures, were also understood to be affirmations of a woman's worth and sources of family pride.

The quotes reveal that *Shimgilina* functioned not only as a patriarchal ritual but also as a meaningful practice that promoted social cohesion. For these participants, the ceremony served to strengthen relationships—with partners, in-laws, and extended family—underscoring its role as both a cultural and relational institution. I believe this perspective aligns with viewing the ceremony as a means of facilitating bonds between families, as discussed in the ethnographic accounts of the ceremony in the literature review (Worku Kalore 2019).

For others, the ceremony was viewed as the official and culturally appropriate way to formalize a relationship, particularly within families and communities where such rituals carry deep social significance. These sentiments were expressed with pride, not reluctance or regret; participants stood by their decisions with a sense of cultural

Mare, who critiqued the ceremony for excluding women and called for greater female participation in the decision-making process, also reflected on its cultural significance. *"This is our identity, and even the idea of a proposal is a Western concept—this is our way of doing things,"* she said. While she now views *Shimgilina* as an important expression of cultural identity, she admitted that at the time of her ceremony—about 15 years ago, when she was 24—she didn't give it much thought, as she was young. She was already living with her now husband, and although her mother was aware of the relationship, her father, as she put it, "*pretended that he did not know*." This was because the relationship hadn't yet been made official. In her words, *Shimgilina* was how the

family formally acknowledged the union—only after the ceremony did her father say, "*Now you can live together.*" For Mare, the ceremony was simply a way to legitimize the relationship in the eyes of her family, especially her father.

Similarly, Eyerus—a 38-year-old mother who holds a master's degree and currently lives in Addis Ababa, though she was born and raised in another town—described *Shimgilina* as "*the official way of showing love and letting others know.*" At the time of her own ceremony, her siblings knew about her boyfriend, but her parents did not. For her, *Shimgilina* was the formal and culturally appropriate way to introduce him to her parents. She noted that while she might not have a wedding or other ceremonies, this was the meaningful way she chose to present her relationship. She claimed that "*this was the way that I was raised.*"

Participants perceived the *Shimgilina* ceremony as a meaningful expression of their identity, referring to their Ethiopian identity, something they took ownership of and spoke about with pride. Moreover, by upholding the tradition in this way, they were able to gain social recognition and legitimize their relationships with their partner among their communities. This perspective—viewing marriage ceremonies as expressions of identity—is also supported by ethnographic research cited in the literature review (Beyene, 2006).

6.1.3 From Oppression to Expression: Fighting Patriarchy with Autonomy

> "It was just for show. Whether they approved or not, I knew I was going to marry him. It was just a performance, but for my family, it held real meaning." (Mare, 38)

The participants openly criticized the systems of oppression embedded in the ceremony. Nonetheless, several patriarchal elements they identified as problematic persisted in their celebrations because of the culture. For instance, all of them noted that "*he was the one who sent*

the elders," reinforcing the traditional gender norm that positions men as the initiators of marriage. This is in line with other similar research that documents the Shimgilna ceremony across Ethiopia, with men taking the lead in the process. Either the groom identifies a girl to marry and informs his father (Telila, 2020) or the parents of the groom identify a "suitable bride" for their son (Beyene, 2006) Additionally, in each case of my participants, the male partner was represented by older male relatives who spoke and acted on his behalf. The elders from here side asked, "Can he provide for her?"—a question that underscores the enduring patriarchal assumption that financial responsibility rests with the man.

Even now, some participants are currently actively reproducing the tradition. Petros, for example, laughed about attending a *Shimgilina* the following week as an "elder." While lighthearted, the moment revealed how age and masculinity grant authority within the ritual, positioning him as both a critic and a carrier of the very structure he critiques.

As outlined in the literature review, Shimgilina in rural contexts is often characterized by limited female agency, with parental authority dominating decisions (Gebeyehu et al. 2023) and the exchange of bridewealth playing a central role (Balew Liyew 2024) . In some accounts, the ceremony is equated with arranged marriage and is closely linked to child marriage, frequently involving girls under the age of 18 (Abera et al., 2020). In sharp contrast, none of these elements were present in the participants' experiences. All were over the age of 24 at the time of their ceremonies, had full autonomy in choosing their partners, and did not engage in bridewealth exchanges. These contrasts underscore how Shimgilina is being selectively adapted—preserving certain cultural forms while discarding others. This process reflects the participants' complex negotiations with culture, patriarchy, and modernity, and illustrates how feminist agency can be expressed through careful and strategic reworking of tradition.

For this group, the absence of traditional constraints, particularly those common in rural settings, such as parental control over partner selection and the timing of marriage, was especially meaningful. The ability to make these decisions independently significantly enhanced their sense of personal autonomy.

Mare, for example, had already been living with her now-husband before the elders were sent. She met and began a relationship with him while studying in another city, without any involvement from her parents. Reflecting on her agency, she shared: *"It was just for show. Whether they approved or not, I knew I was going to marry him"*

To further support the point that she independently chose her husband, she shared, after the interview, that her family had initially been deeply anxious because her partner belonged to an ethnic group they were unfamiliar with. *"They were really scared about what he might even look like,"* she admitted.

For another participant, Eden, there was no parental control over her marital choices. Reflecting on her decision to proceed independently, she stated: *"If I made sure they couldn't say no to me about who I'm going to marry, it's fine."* She explained that she had already moved out of her parents' house, lived alone for two years, and had been living with her partner for eight months— without her parents knowing.

From my observations, it appears that this group exercised a significant degree of autonomy well before the *Shimgilina* ceremony took place. They chose their own partners and engaged in relationships where they got to know one another as boyfriend and girlfriend—without parental involvement. In fact, three out of the five participants reported that they had already been living with their partners in some cases in a different city prior to the ceremony, without their parents'

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knowledge. Ultimately, they made the decision to marry their partners on their own terms, with or without a formal proposal from the man (which is a separate topic deserving its own discussion). In some cases, they even cross ethnic boundaries in choosing a partner. Taken together, these experiences reflect a strong sense of personal autonomy, with participants placing considerable value on their ability to make independent life decisions.

Eyerus, who chose to get married at the age of 31, was the one who initiated the *Shimgilina* ceremony with her now-husband. She first informed her sister, asking her to pass the message on to their parents. After receiving the news, her parents worked with the couple to choose a date that fits the couple's work schedules. Once the date was set, her parents informed her of the time the groom's family should arrive—6 a.m. in the morning. When they came, Eyerus's father, mother, and other relatives were present to receive them. They asked the customary questions, held the initial conversation, and then told the groom's family to return later, following tradition.

> "My boyfriend and I decided we wanted to make our relationship official, and then my parents took over—deciding who they would call, when the date would be, and handling all the ceremonial details." (Eyerus, 38)

This suggests that the decision to marry was primarily their own, made independently of parental pressure. In each case, participants first decided with their partners to hold a *Shimgilina* ceremony, and only then informed their parents. While they had full control in choosing their partners, their parents retained decision-making power over the ceremony itself—determining who the matchmakers would be, who would sit on each side, what questions would be asked, who to invite, the date of the ceremony, and even the food that would be served.

For this group, what mattered most was the partner they had chosen, the timing of formalizing the relationship, and the future they envisioned together with their partner As a result, many perceived

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the remaining gendered aspects of the Shimgilina ceremony as having minimal impact on their lives. While they acknowledged its patriarchal dimensions, they often described the ceremony as *"shallow," "theatrical," "dramatic,"* or *"merely performative,"* indicating that, for them, its significance was more symbolic than truly consequential.

I believe this group perceived the ceremony as largely symbolic, something that did not exert real power over them. They contrasted their experience with more traditional rural practices, where it is common for a girl to be entirely under her parents' control and to have little or no voice in the decision-making process (Erulkar 2013; Gebeyehu et al. 2023)

Petros, who had sent male elders for the Shimgilina ceremony and had been married for eleven years, remarked: *"Even though we had a ceremony like Shimgilina, I still change diapers, we clean the house together, and we try to divide responsibilities equally."* His reflection highlights how the symbolic performance of tradition did not dictate the dynamics of their everyday marital relationship.

Even in the case of Eyerus, who now lives in Addis with her husband, the Shimgilina ceremony was held in her hometown to accommodate familial expectations. Because her husband had no connections in that area, it was her parents who selected the elders to represent him. *"They ended up choosing my father's friends,"* she explained, *"just so we could say someone was sent."*

In her experience, it wasn't even real male elders who participated—it was a family friend. This made the ceremony feel somewhat superficial to her and reinforced the sense that it did not hold real power over her.

Based on the information above, one can argue that although the participants were fully aware of the patriarchal aspects of the *Shimgilina* ceremony, other factors influenced their decision to participate without necessarily attempting to change it. Firstly, they saw the social and cultural value of the ceremony. Additionally, their relatively privileged social position—marked by higher education, urban residence, stable employment, and/or financial independence—meant that the ceremony did not significantly constrain or harm them, especially in comparison to girls from rural areas. Instead, this privilege enabled them to reinterpret and selectively engage with the tradition, omitting elements that undermined their sense agency, such as partner choice and the timing of marriage.

Thus, the weakened impact of the ceremony shifts the conversation away from viewing it solely as a site of oppression and instead frames it as something negotiable, open to their influence. It becomes a space they can strategically use to their advantage, which brings us to Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining

As I mentioned in the conceptual framework, Kandiyoti's description of patriarchal bargaining in classical patriarchy is relevant, as Ethiopia exhibits many of the same characteristics. Moreover, Kandiyoti emphasizes that women living under such patriarchal systems often adopt interpersonal strategies to enhance their security—for example, by manipulating relationships with their sons or

husbands, sometimes to the extent that the male patriarch loses authority to his wife (Kandiyoti, 1988).

By the same token, participants did not view *Shimgilina* as a source of power over them, but rather as a strategic tool for navigating cultural expectations and building their own forms of power. For many, the ceremony held cultural and social value that they sought to leverage. It was a way to gain credibility, maintain harmony, and affirm familial authority—reflected in comments like "maintain a good relationship with the in-laws," "honor my mother's authority," and "show respect for my family." Through this engagement, participants were not only conforming to expectations but also asserting influence and strengthening their positions within family and community structures.

In her work, Kandiyoti describes women who adopt veiling as a strategic practice to navigate entry into wage labor—a sphere traditionally dominated by men and often considered inappropriate or transgressive for women. By adhering to expected gender norms through veiling, these women mitigate social backlash and maintain respectability, even as they enter spaces typically restricted to men (Kandiyoti, 1988). Similarly, the participants in this study engage with tradition not as an act of submission, but as a strategic effort to balance their "progressive" or "modern" feminist identity with cultural belonging. Their feminist consciousness, education, and professional status—which distinguish them from previous female generations—may have created a sense of detachment from traditional expectations. Participating in *Shimgilina*, then, becomes a way of giving back and reaffirming familial and cultural ties, preserving the tradition as a resource they can draw upon when needed.

For example, Mare, who described herself as a strong-willed and independent person, shared that she had spent years studying in another city and often went against her family's expectations. *"I've always been rebellious,"* she said. *"I studied in a different city and used to do the opposite of what they told me. But with this [the ceremony], I wanted to make them happy."*

These participants, whether due to their personalities, education, or professional status, do not fit the mold of the "typical" or "traditional" Ethiopian woman. As a result, they often feel a desire to give back and make their families happy by participating in the ceremony, which holds significant cultural value within society.

> "I have always struggled with it. You're saying you're possessing the woman, that she doesn't have the right to decide for herself. There's an attempt to rebrand or reimagine it, but it's still the man who has the agency here. It's not easy to reconcile that with modernity, which sees everyone as equal—men and women alike. So, the underlying tone has always made me uncomfortable." (Petros, 41)

Nonetheless, this dynamic should not be seen merely as something they exploit for personal or social gain, such as reading would oversimplify the complexity of their choices.

There is a clear tension here: while these feminists strategically engage with tradition, they also make compromises. It's a form of delayed gratification, where participation often requires the temporary silencing of feminist critiques or their "modern" identities in exchange for forming "respectable" relationships and affirming a sense of cultural belonging. For some, it is easier; for others, it was a struggle.

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6.1.4 Navigating Feminist Agency through Cultural Attachment

At this point of the analysis, I believe that applying Nego-feminism is crucial for understanding how participants navigate negotiation within the cultural framework in which they are embedded. This framework emphasizes strategies of give-and-take, compromise, and relational balance, offering a lens through which to interpret their actions and choices (Nnaemeka 2004)

For this group, temporarily setting aside their gender consciousness and critiques of *Shimgilina* made strategic sense. Allowing their parents to take control of the ceremony was not a sign of submission, but a calculated trade-off. In exchange for suppressing their discomfort, they gained tangible social benefits: the formal legitimacy of their union—"*by doing it the official way*," the affirmation of love and respect—"*if a man loves you, he's supposed to do that*," and continued belonging within their families and communities—"*to make my parents happy*." Their relationship with their parents, already marked by autonomy made this trade-off feel possible. Because they had made independent choices about their partners and the decision to marry, they felt in a position to give back—to honor their families through Shimgilina without feeling coerced.

Additionally, I believe that understanding what participants negotiate through this process requires careful consideration of their indigenous cultural foundations. As Nnaemeka (2004) argues, meaningful progress—whether in development or gender justice—must build on local knowledge systems rather than override them. (Nnaemeka 2004). This perspective is crucial, as it encourages us to recognize that the value participants place on *Shimgilina* is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and indigenous ways of knowing and being. When they refer to the ceremony as "*our way of living,*" "*that is how I was raised,*" "*our way,*" or "*our culture,*" with pride, they are not merely following

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rules—they are actively affirming their cultural identity. Additionally, their understanding of concepts such as *"marriage," "respect," "love,"* and "*being official with a loved one*" is shaped by a cultural logic that informs who they are and how they relate to others. Recognizing and respecting this cultural grounding allows us to see that their participation is not passive acceptance, but a deliberate effort to reconcile their cultural identity that they embody with their feminist values.

Now that this foundation has been established, Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency can be introduced to further deepen the analysis of women's actions. Building on Foucault's concept of subjectivation, Mahmood challenges liberal notions of agency that define it solely as resistance or the pursuit of freedom from oppression. Instead, she argues that power should not be seen only as repressive, but also as productive—shaping what individuals value, desire, and perceive as a meaningful life. Within this framework, agency is understood as a capacity for action that is shaped by, rather than opposed to, structures of subordination. As such, agency may be expressed through practices that sustain continuity, uphold tradition, and maintain social stability, rather than seeking radical transformation (Mahmood 2001).

For the urban, middle-class, educated Ethiopian in this study, desire is shaped not only by feminist consciousness but also by deep cultural attachments and ethical responsibilities within their culture. Being raised in Ethiopia plays a significant role in how they understand key social concepts such as marriage, respect, and pride—particularly as they are expressed through the emotional and symbolic structure of *Shimgilina*.

Although many participants were fully aware of the patriarchal aspects of the ceremony, they did not articulate a desire to challenge or alter it. This was not out of submission or lack of awareness, but rather because their central aspirations were shaped by a desire to carry out the marriage process in a culturally appropriate way—one that introduced families formally, honored their parents, and helped build harmonious relationships with in-laws. These actions were viewed as essential steps toward becoming "respectable women" and "good daughters," in line with societal expectations, but without compromising their personal autonomy, which they believed they already possessed.

For this group, participation in the ritual itself was intentional, as they believed they had already exercised agency in important areas—most notably in selecting their partners and determining the timing of the ceremony. As a result, delegating authority to their parents and preserving gendered elements of the ritual, such as having male elders speak on behalf of the groom, was not experienced as a primary concern or site of struggle. Instead, these aspects were seen as formalities—secondary to the more meaningful decisions that had already affirmed their autonomy and secured their place as a "wife" within both their families and extended communities.

In this sense, the participants' agency did not lie in rejecting or resisting tradition. Their desire for autonomy had already been fulfilled. However, their desire to maintain close family ties remained unmet and was deeply rooted in how they understood marriage, themselves, and their relationships with others. As a result, they chose continuity and decided to hold the ceremony as a way to stay connected to their families and communities.

6.2 Reformers: Feminist Shifts in Ceremony

> "Even though it wasn't common for women to sit in the negotiation, I wanted my mother and grandmother to be part of it. So, I asked my mom, and she said yes. That's how they became involved in the process." (Tigist, 28)

For this group, Shimgilina was not simply a tradition to be followed, it was a cultural practice they could actively reform. Rather than rejecting the ceremony outright, they sought to reshape it in ways that aligned more closely with their feminist values. They approached it as something through which to exercise agency—meaningful and worth engaging with critically, adapting it where possible to reflect their own beliefs and priorities.

6.2.1 Feminist Critique by Reformers

> "It's only men who are sent and who sit to ask the questions" (Tigsit, 28)

Like the other group, these participants are young, middle-class, and well-educated Ethiopians working in the fields of gender and development. However, all members of this group are women. Their backgrounds have given them the tools—both in experience and language—to critically reflect on Shimgilina and clearly articulate the aspects they found oppressive.

For example, Tigist, a 28-year-old with a master's degree in Gender Studies from Addis Ababa University, noted, *"It's only men who are sent and who sit to ask the questions,"* highlighting the absence and lack of representation of women throughout the process. With her background in gender studies and herself being a woman, she emphasized the gender category, paying close attention to the lack of representation of women.

Similarly, Tsige, a 28-year-old currently pursuing her master's degree at Addis Ababa University, spoke with visible frustration when reflecting on the gender dynamics of Shimgilina. "*Women*

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don't have a formal role. Your father and uncle are seen as more important than your mother and aunt—even though they're the ones closest to you," she explained. Her critique was not only analytical but deeply personal, rooted in her experience as a woman. She expressed discomfort with the idea that, in the future, she too might be excluded from her children's ceremonies, despite the emotional labor she would invest in their lives. I believe her frustration was compounded by her own experience: when she tried to include women in her side of the ceremony, her request was denied, with her family dismissively telling her, "*Feminism doesn't work here.*"

These reflections reveal that the ceremony is not accepted uncritically. Participants often problematize the absence of women, drawing on their personal experiences and educational backgrounds.

6.2.2 Shimgilina as Protection, Belonging, and Identity

> "My relationship with my partner is not traditional—we live together and are still not married. So, I felt the need to give something back to my parents, to make them feel happy and respected. That's why I agreed to have the ceremony." (Soliyana, 34)

Despite their critiques, the participants also acknowledged the cultural and social significance of the ceremony, as well as its potential protective function for women within the community.

Even Melat, a development practitioner who had her own "type" of *Shimgilina* ceremony two years ago and was among the most vocal in resisting it, acknowledged that the ritual could serve a protective purpose in some contexts.

Melat's connection to the topic runs deep. She has worked extensively on early marriage prevention, she expressed strong frustration with the harmful consequences of such practices,

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particularly for young girls. That frustration became personal when she tried to shift the narrative to her sister's ceremony. Melat had hoped to avoid the typical question—*"Can he provide for her?"*—which she saw as both classist and patriarchal. Despite her efforts, the question was still asked, which left her feeling disappointed and disempowered. By the time it was her turn, Melat took a different approach: rather than hosting a full ceremony, she simply introduced her partner to her parents and allowed them to ask a few questions. It was her way of maintaining a sense of respect and family connection while resisting the more rigid and symbolic performances of tradition.

However, Melat still saw the protective aspect of the shimgilina, as she explained: *"It can be used to make sure he doesn't already have another wife or family—it helps prevent scammers,"* she explained. *"If he's trying to marry more than once, the elders won't go along with it."* Others described the ceremony as acting like *"a third eye"*—a means of spotting red flags—and emphasized that it creates a form of communal oversight in which *"stakeholders are there to assess whether he's worth it."*

Tigist, who was highly critical of the couple's exclusion from the process and opposed the notion that it is the man who solely "*decides*" to marry the woman, nevertheless acknowledged the ceremony's protective dimension. As she noted, *"It gives a sense of who they are sending their daughter to, and the process helps protect her"*

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Fatima, a 30-year-old feminist from a law background, noted that even the *shimagilewoch* (elders) who are sent can serve as mediators in times of conflict, stating that "*they can help resolve issues when something happens.*" Tsige echoed this sentiment, explaining that "*the shimagilewoch are responsible for overseeing the marriage and holding the groom accountable if he does something inappropriate.*"

It is important to recognize the complex ways in which participants made sense of *Shimgilina*. While they were critical of its patriarchal structure, particularly the marginalization of women in decision-making, they also saw the ceremony as serving a protective function. This perspective can be linked to the cultural respect afforded to elders, especially older men, in Ethiopian society. The term *Shimagilé* is associated with a knowledgeable and experienced person who commands respect. As a result, the involvement of such figures in the ceremony can offer a sense of protection to women (Kassas, and Tessema, 2019), especially in a country that ranks 173rd out of 188 on the Global Gender Inequality Index, reflecting significant disparities in areas such as reproductive health, economic participation, and women's autonomy (Wright, 2020). In many cases, women remain economically and socially dependent on men. Within this context, a tradition such as *Shimgilina*—despite its patriarchal foundations—can function as a form of social protection. As such, these participants did not dismiss outright or abolish without critically considering the structural gaps it may, in certain contexts, be compensating for.

Additionally, like the previous group, these participants emphasized the social and cultural significance of the ceremony, at times, framing it as an expression of identity. They viewed

Shimgilina as a means of affirming belonging, strengthening meaningful relationships, and gaining respect within new familial and social networks.

For example, Tigist—despite her frustration with the marginalization of women in the process, including in her own experience—also embraces her Ethiopian identity and the cultural meanings embedded in the ceremony. Reflecting on its significance, she shared: "*As an Ethiopian, it's a source of pride for the family. It's part of adulthood and integration into the social fabric.*

Soliyana, a 34-year-old woman who identifies as a radical feminist and is deeply committed to challenging gender norms, also saw *Shimgilina* as a way to express care and respect for her family. Her feminism, she explained, was shaped by her father—a man she affectionately described as "*a girl's dad*" who raised her to be strong and outspoken. Wanting to honor that relationship, she chose to participate in the ceremony not for its traditional meaning, but as a gesture of love. "*I did it for my parents,*" she said. After the ceremony, she could tell how genuinely happy her father was. The next day, during her PhD graduation ceremony, her father proudly introduced her fiancé to relatives, smiling with pride because, as Soliyana put it, "*he had already done the ceremony.*" For her, the decision to take part in Shimgilina was not about complying with patriarchy, but as a way of giving back to a father who had always supported her feminist journey

Tsige, who identifies as a radical feminist but has recently reflected on the need to moderate her stance in certain contexts, saw the ceremony as an opportunity to manage perceptions. She explained: *"Especially from my partner's side, they might think I'm easy or not serious if I don't have the ceremony. They wouldn't show me the same level of respect."*

For this group, there was a clear awareness of the patriarchal dimensions embedded in the *Shimgilina* ceremony. Yet, participants also engaged with it in culturally meaningful and relational ways. Rather than viewing the ritual solely as a patriarchal imposition, many saw it as a practice that could serve multiple purposes within their social world. Some participants interpreted *Shimgilina* as a form of protection, drawing on the cultural value placed on elders in Ethiopian society. Others, like Soliyana, viewed it as a way to maintain strong familial ties, particularly with parents Additionally, the ceremony functioned as a strategic tool to manage perceptions and affirm their social legitimacy as respectable women.

In their own culturally grounded ways, participants used *Shimgilina* to strengthen interpersonal relationships—honoring elders, reinforcing family bonds, and performing respectability in a way that aligned with their Ethiopian identity. These interpretations reflected a deep understanding of concepts such as respect, belonging, and interdependence, shaped by their social context rather than external feminist ideals alone.

6.2.3 Shaping the Ritual: Autonomy Through Cultural Influence

This group consists of highly educated women, all of whom married between the ages of 27 and 30 and entered their relationships through personal choice rather than family arrangement. They independently selected their partners—often beginning as boyfriend–girlfriend relationships—with no parental involvement in the matchmaking process. Importantly, the timing and initiation of the *Shimgilina* ceremony were determined by the couple themselves, reflecting a greater degree of autonomy. One illustrative example involves a participant who was in a relationship with a non-Ethiopian partner and chose to formalize the union on her terms, based on her priorities.

This marks a significant difference between the participants in my study and girls under the age of 18, who are often married off by their parents and face a heightened risk of spousal abuse and domestic violence throughout their marriages (Abera et al. 2020). The women in my study entered marriage based on partnership or love, whereas in many rural cases, girls are married either to prevent premarital pregnancy(Kok et al. 2023) or to strengthen familial ties (Abera et al. 2020).

However, despite their clear exercise of personal autonomy in partner selection and their feminist critiques of women's marginalization, patriarchal elements remained embedded in most of their *Shimgilina* ceremonies. This group was not homogenous—they navigated different cultural expectations, family dynamics, and feminist questions—but across their varied experiences, certain patterns persisted. In nearly all cases, it was the groom who initiated the ceremony by "*sending the elders*," a role always occupied by men.

Only one participant deviated from this norm, opting instead for an informal dinner with her now-husband and her parents. Even in this instance of resistance—such as Melat's—traditional gendered expectations still surfaced. All of the other participants, including Melat, recalled the question being asked by the elders from their side, "*Can he provide for her?*" In Melat's case, although she actively resisted many traditional elements, a similar expectation emerged in a different form: when she introduced him to her family, they asked, "*What do you do?*" However, when she met his family, they did not ask her the same question. This subtle omission reinforces how deeply ingrained assumptions about male provision and female dependency continue to shape interactions, even in less conventional or intentionally subversive settings.

As an analytical distinction, I argue that the first group, the Reinterpreters, believed that they possessed a form of agency rooted in their autonomy to make choices such as relocating to new cities, independently choosing their partners, and, in many cases, living with them without parental involvement. Even those who did not cohabit before marriage shared stories of being supported by their families,—"*to make these decisions on their own*". These experiences contributed to a strong sense of independence, which, in my reading, formed the basis of their sense of autonomy and how they negotiated with the shimgilina ceremony.

In contrast, this group—although some also lived with their partners—did not frame those choices as central expressions of agency. Instead, they saw their agency as more visible in how they engaged with the *Shimgilina* ceremony itself. Their sense of agency emerged through efforts to reshape its structure, procedures, and symbolic meanings.

> "I wanted to have it because I wanted to influence the ceremony, you know. I wanted my mom to sit and ask questions." (Tsige, 28)

Still, I would argue that although this group did not explicitly frame their actions prior to the ceremony as feminist or agentic, they were nonetheless exercising a form of agency even before and during the ceremony for two key reasons. First, none of the participants expressed regret or negative feelings about their participation. On the contrary, they described the experience using words like "exciting," "empowering," "fun," and sometimes "normal". Their urban, educated, and middle-class backgrounds appeared to shield them from feelings of constraint, allowing them to engage with the tradition in ways that felt voluntary and affirming. I'm sure that if we asked people who participated in the traditional ceremony, they wouldn't describe it that way.

Second, several participants explained that their decision to participate in *Shimgilina* was driven by a desire to "*show respect for their family*" or to avoid being perceived as "*easy*." In this sense, their choice was not rooted in coercion but in a strategic effort to preserve and strengthen familial and social relationships. This reflects what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) calls *patriarchal bargaining*— a form of agency in which women navigate patriarchal structures not by overt resistance, but by making calculated decisions that allow them to secure respect, legitimacy, and emotional proximity within existing social norms (Kandiyoti, 1988). For these women, as with the previous group, *Shimgilina* was not experienced as an oppressive practice. Because they are educated, middle-class, urban women, the ceremony was not forced upon them. Instead, it was something they actively chose to participate in—viewing it as an opportunity to build social capital and strengthen familial ties.

That said, for these feminists, simply choosing their partners and nurturing personal relationships using this ceremony wasn't enough to fully express their sense of autonomy. They recognized that the ceremony still carried symbolic and social weight in their lives. As a result, they actively sought to reshape certain aspects of the ritual that they found limiting or misaligned with their values

For instance, Fatima shared that she chose to have the *Shimgilina* ceremony to "*acknowledge [her] family*" and "*allow them to be part of [her] marriage*." She defines her feminism as "*resisting restrictive structures that hold back women*," and for her, a key expression of both her feminism and sense of agency was having the ceremony, was ensured that no one asked about her partner's financial status or discussed dowry.

In her family's ethnic tradition, the ceremony unfolds in two stages: first, the women go to request the bride's hand, followed by the men on another day. Fatima described the first stage as going "*perfectly.*" Her mother and grandmother—both of whom she credits as shaping her feminist values—led the process without inquiring about her partner's finances or social standing. She appreciated that this part of the ceremony allowed her family to ask meaningful questions about her partner's intentions without reducing the interaction to economic terms.

However, the second stage, when the men entered, felt markedly different. As she put it, "*They might even end up using the power they think they have,*" she said. Over forty men from both sides were involved in this phase, and her mother served as a key mediator and communicator on her behalf. Fatima recalled telling her mother, "*This isn't about exchanging me or giving me away like property—it's just part of the culture. It's a way for the families to be introduced to one another.*"

Nonetheless, moments of discomfort persisted. Fatima recalled that during the negotiation, one elder from her side remarked, "*Even if he takes additional wives, they will never get divorced.*" She recognized that such statements reflected the values of those involved in the ceremony rather than those of herself or her partner. "*So, I just let it go,*" she noted. "*But at the same time, because of my influence, they didn't bring up dowry or anything like that.*"

For Tigist , *"representation was everything"* when it came to the *Shimgilina* ceremony. She recalled telling her mother, *"I want women from my side of the family to sit with the matchmakers, because they also helped raise me."* Her mother agreed without hesitation. *"She just said, 'Of*

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course,'" Tigist explained. This decision allowed her to include her mother, grandmother, and one of her mother's close friends in the negotiation process. Curious about how her family accepted the idea so easily, I asked her directly how it was easy for her. She smiled and said, *"My family is very open-minded."* She added, *"Both of my parents walked me down the aisle. That's not something people usually do, but it felt right. It was symbolic of the way I was raised."*

Still, her vision of equal representation didn't fully carry over to her husband's side. *"I wanted him to send women too,"* she admitted, *"but it just got too complicated. Who would he even send? And would the other men be okay with that? Probably not."* Ultimately, she let it go. *"To be honest,"* she added, *"most of the men on his side weren't just elders—they were church figures. So, it was hard."*

Soliyana, who identifies as a radical feminist and describes herself as someone who wants to *"disrupt"* conventional norms, initially envisioned an all-women *Shimgilina* ceremony. *"I wanted to flip the script and shock people,"* she explained. *"But in the end, it just wasn't feasible—there were too many factors to consider: logistics, family dynamics, all of it."*

Because her partner was from a different country, she had more flexibility in influencing who would be sent on his behalf. Although she initially wanted to include women on his side, it wasn't feasible. *"I really tried,"* she said, *"but I couldn't find anyone who could take on the role."* Instead, she appointed one of her feminist male friends to serve as an elder—someone she felt genuinely reflected her values. Thus, when the customary question came up—how her partner would provide

for her—her chosen representative confidently responded, *"She's very capable and can take care of herself."* Soliyana recalled, *"I actually found it very empowering."*

Drawing on Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of Nego-feminism—a feminism grounded in negotiation, give-and-take, and no-ego—these participants did not reject tradition outright. Instead, they exercised agency by engaging with *Shimgilina* as a site of relational negotiation. Their stories reflect the core principles of Nego-feminism: flexibility, mutual exchange, and the importance of lived experience. Moreover, in line with Nnaemeka's concept, they did not position culture as something to resist but rather worked within it, viewing their feminist development as emerging from—not against—their cultural identity (Nnaemeka 2004). For this group, there was a greater sense of tension—each participant navigated a complex mix of enabling and limiting factors.

For Fatima, her agency was reinforced by the presence of feminist role models—her mother and grandmother—as well as by an ethnic tradition that allowed for a women-led version of *Shimgilina*. She exercised influence by ensuring that discussions around dowry and financial status were excluded from the ceremony. However, her ability to shape the entire ritual was limited. During the male-dominated stage—where over forty men participated and where she was not present—conversations unfolded that she could not control, many of which reflected patriarchal and religious norms, including the acceptance of polygamy. Aware of her position as a young woman, she strategically relied on her mother, who held greater social standing, to advocate on her behalf. Still, given the broader power structures at play, she chose to let certain things go. This decision was not a surrender but a calculated act of balance—an acknowledgment that while she could influence specific elements, transforming the entire system was neither feasible nor necessary to

assert her agency. Even within the constraints of the ceremony, she was able to negotiate and gain something on her terms.

Tigist similarly drew strength from her family's open-mindedness. Her feminist vision of including maternal figures in the negotiation process was realized on her side, reflecting a form of relational agency. However, she encountered limitations when attempting to extend this inclusion to her husband's side, where religious authority and rigid gender roles prevailed. Rather than escalate conflict, Tigist chose to let go of that demand. While this decision may appear as a concession, it reflects the logic of give-and-take. She was able to influence the cultural script to include those who mattered to her—like her mother and grandmother—but recognized that some aspects were beyond her control and chose to strategically let them go.

Nego-feminism is especially valuable for understanding the complexities revealed in these stories because it centers lived experience as a site of feminist theorizing. Rather than viewing feminism as a fixed set of principles or a rigid form of resistance, Nego-feminism invites us to pay attention to how women engage in everyday negotiations—talking to family members, letting certain things go, or asserting influence where they can. These small, strategic acts—what Obioma Nnaemeka calls "the story of now"—are where feminism is practiced (Nnaemeka 2004).

When we examine their lived experiences, we also see the importance of flexibility. Each woman made choices shaped by the space available to her, using the tools at her disposal to assert her values. This is where the flexibility of Nego-feminism becomes crucial—it reminds us that feminism cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model(Nnaemeka 2004). For instance, Tigist could not

confront patriarchy in the same way Fatima did—her context was different. Their families, ethnic culture, religious affiliations, and surrounding social networks shaped what was possible for them. What Nego-feminism offers is a framework that honors these differences, acknowledging that feminist action can look like resistance, compromise, or strategic silence. Through this lens, we can see that each woman was not only navigating culture but also contributing to it—on her own terms.

Across all three stories, agency is exercised not by rejecting Shimgilina, but by working through it—treating culture not as an obstacle, but as a resource for feminist expression. These women do not seek to dismantle the tradition outright; instead, they reconfigure it in subtle yet meaningful ways to reflect their values. As one participant shared, "*I wanted my mother and grandmother to be part of the negotiation, because they also helped raise me*." This inclusion reflects not a break from tradition, but a reimagining of it—one that honors both cultural heritage and gendered justice.

Their actions are rooted in deeply held cultural values of family pride, respect, and social legitimacy. As another participant explained, "*I wanted to influence it*" Rather than viewing these norms as barriers, participants saw them as frameworks through which they could assert their feminist commitments. In their view, culture was not the enemy of feminism—it was the ground from which new possibilities could emerge.

By intentionally including women in the negotiation, choosing supportive elders to represent them, or steering conversations away from practices like dowry, they enact a form of agency deeply embedded in cultural and relational logics, in a way that made sense to them individually.

The third aspect is that these women practiced no-ego feminism, as theorized by Obioma Nnaemeka(Nnaemeka 2004). They recognized Shimgilina not just as a personal milestone, but as a communal event requiring negotiation between individual feminist values and collective family expectations. So that is why "*they had to let it go*" even when others are using "*authorities that they think they have*" or "*family logistics become complicated*"

Moreover, Saba Mahmood building on Foucauldian' s reading of power reminds us that power is not solely repressive; it is also productive, shaping how individuals come to understand their roles, responsibilities, and emotional investments (Mahmood 2001). For the urban, middle-class, educated Ethiopian women in this group, agency unfolded through the negotiation between their feminist sensibilities and deeply rooted cultural identities.

While they recognized Shimgilina as a patriarchal institution, participants also understood it as a meaningful cultural ritual that reinforced family bonds and facilitated the merging of kin networks. Their desire to participate was not merely an act of compliance; rather, it reflected a culturally informed aspiration to enter marriage with social legitimacy and communal recognition. As one participant put it, "*if I don't do it, they might think I am easy.*"

At the same time, their feminist sensibilities urged them to question the exclusion of women from this union or control the discourse. Their desire to be seen as "respectable women" in the eyes of their in-laws was balanced by a responsibility to advocate for greater gender inclusion. As a result, they asked critical questions, pushed for the inclusion of maternal figures, and subtly reshaped the ceremony's structure. This push for representation was not solely about achieving gender parity;

it reflected a deeper aspiration to cultivate a relational and gender-inclusive community as they transitioned into married life.

This is precisely where their agency lies—not in outright rejection, but in the distinct desires that lead to a negotiation between honoring familial expectations and embodying feminist values.

6.2.4 Conclusion

I identified two feminist approaches to the Shimgilina ceremony among the middle-class, educated, urban Ethiopians. The first group, the *Reinterpreters*, view the ritual as largely symbolic—something they engage in primarily to legitimize their relationships and fulfill social expectations. The second group, the *Reformers*, seeks to reshape the ceremony in ways that better reflect their feminist values. Although their approaches differ, both groups demonstrate forms of agency that are strategic, nuanced, and deeply rooted in cultural context.

By applying the frameworks of intersectionality, Nego-feminism, patriarchal bargaining, and Saba Mahmood's concept of embodied agency, I have shown that the participants are exercising agency within a complex web of cultural expectations, family dynamics, sense of personal autonomy, and feminist commitments. Rather than acting in isolation, their ecisions are shaped by overlapping pressures—such as the desire to honor familial traditions, assert independence, preserve social legitimacy, and remain true to feminist values.

Crucially, the points at which participants locate room for negotiation vary. For some— particularly those I describe as *Reinterpreters*—agency is exercised prior to the ceremony itself,

through the selection of their partner, the decision to cohabit without parental involvement, or the choice to time the ceremony on their own terms. Because they perceive the most meaningful acts of autonomy to have already occurred, they do not seek to influence the ceremony's structure. Instead, they engage with it as a largely symbolic ritual—one that offers social recognition and familial harmony, but no longer constrains them.

Others—the *Reformers*—see the ceremony itself as the primary site of negotiation. For them, agency involves actively reshaping the ritual to include women, avoid patriarchal tropes such as economic vetting, or introduce new forms of representation. Their feminist consciousness motivates them to intervene more directly, treating the ceremony not simply as a formality but as a meaningful space in which gender norms can be challenged, even if only partially.

Together, these divergent strategies reveal that feminist agency is not a uniform act of resistance or acceptance but a situated and relational process. It is exercised differently depending on one's social position, family relationships, and sense of autonomy.

7 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore a central puzzle: How do young, urban, educated, middle-class Ethiopians who identify as feminists engage with *Shimgilina*, a traditionally patriarchal pre-wedding ceremony? Rather than whether participation in such rituals signals conformity or lack of agency, I asked how these feminists negotiate their feminist values within deeply embedded cultural institutions. At the heart of this inquiry was a desire to understand how agency is exercised not only through resistance or rejection but also through subtle, strategic negotiation within existing structures.

To explore this question, I conducted qualitative research with ten self-identified feminists—nine women and one man—in Addis Ababa who had the *Shimgilina* ceremony. While they shared similar social locations shaped by age, urban residence, higher education, and middle-class status, their perspectives and strategies for engaging with the ritual varied considerably. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, I examined their lived experiences with a focus on the ceremony itself, the decisions they made around it, and the tensions or conflicts that emerged in the process.

Empirically, the study revealed two distinct patterns in how participants navigated their agency. The first group experienced a strong sense of autonomy before the *Shimgilina* ceremony—especially in their ability to choose their life partners independently. This prior exercise of choice gave them a sense of control, which made them less inclined to challenge or intervene in the structure of the ceremony itself. Instead, they allowed their families to take control of the ritual,

often reinterpreting its meaning in personal and symbolic terms—seeing it not as something done *to* them, but as a gesture of respect for their families or cultural continuity.

By contrast, the second group did not feel they had exercised meaningful autonomy prior to the ceremony and instead viewed *Shimgilina* as the critical site through which to express agency. These women actively engaged with the ceremony, seeking to reform it by incorporating feminist values—such as including maternal figures in the negotiation or pushing back against patriarchal assumptions. For them, the ceremony was not a passive tradition but a space of negotiation, transformation, and cultural critique.

By weaving together these four frameworks—intersectionality, patriarchal bargaining, Nego-feminism, and Mahmood's rethinking of agency—this study not only applies existing theories but also extends them by grounding them in the lived experiences of urban, middle-class Ethiopian feminists navigating a deeply gendered cultural ritual.

While Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality within a legal framework to expose how overlapping systems of oppression are often overlooked, this study broadens the concept by applying it to cultural identity and lived experience. Rather than viewing national identity as a fixed structural category, I analyze how participants actively embody and express their Ethiopian identity through rituals like Shimgilina. This identity is not solely as sources of constraint, but also a frameworks of meaning and potential empowerment. In doing so, I extend Crenshaw's framework to show that intersecting identities can produce not only compounded oppression but also culturally grounded forms of agency and resistance.

This study extends the concept of patriarchal bargaining by emphasizing that interpersonal strategies are not uniform but deeply shaped by cultural meanings and relational dynamics. The "*bargain*" is highly flexible and context-specific, influenced not only by the type of patriarchy present but also by historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. Identities such as the "*good daughter," "good wife,"* or *"respectable in-law*" are not universal categories—they are negotiated within specific cultural frameworks that give them meaning and value.

This study strengthens Nego-feminism by providing empirical evidence of how African women negotiate cultural rituals in relational, context-specific ways. It shows that even among similarly positioned women, feminist negotiation takes diverse forms—some assert agency through choosing their partners, while others reshape the ritual itself. This supports Nnaemeka's emphasis on flexibility and expands it by demonstrating that negotiation happens at different stages, through various strategies, and for different purposes. Furthermore, while Nego-feminism values indigenous cultural knowledge, it often lacks concrete illustrations of how culture can serve as a site of feminist theorizing. This research bridges that gap by showing how participants drew from cultural logics—like familial pride, community belonging, and respect—not only as constraints but as tools for expressing feminist values. Culture, then, becomes not just something to negotiate within, but a generative source of feminist knowledge.

This study also adds depth to Saba Mahmood's rethinking of agency. While Mahmood challenges liberal feminist frameworks by showing how women can exercise agency through tradition, she tends to present groups—like the pious women in Cairo—as relatively unified in their orientation. In contrast, my findings reveal that even within a seemingly homogenous group, experiences of

autonomy and desire vary significantly. One of the most notable points of divergence among participants was their sense of autonomy.

These factors influenced not only their motivations but also how they navigated the same cultural ritual in different ways. This suggests that Mahmood's "*network of concepts*"—desire, responsibility, and affect—is not fixed, but fluid and contingent on one's position within intersecting power structures. Ironically, while agency is deeply rooted in cultural norms and practices, it is also highly individualized, revealing the relational and context-specific nature of how power operates in everyday life.

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