



INTERVIEW

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIESHI LEMA

(The Author of *Parched Earth*)

LIFE OF A WOMAN

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001, Elieshi Lema, a female Tanzanian Writer caught a national and continental attention with the publication of her first novel *Parched Earth*. The novel revolves around three women and the challenges they encounter in their love affairs as a result of the patriarchal influence in their society. Like most African female writers, Lema describes how patriarchy interferes with the love affairs of the female characters and suggests a way forward in maintaining families and personal freedom at the same time.

The story is told in first person, narrated by Doreen, who is born in a family in which the father is completely absent. Doreen and her brothers grow up and become adults under the care of their mother, Foibe Seko. Doreen fall in love with Martin, an accountant, and decides to marry him without informing any member of her family. Martin and Doreen believe their true love would sustain their matrimony but later on Doreen explains the difficult situation which exists in her marriage and the widening gap between Martin and her. Doreen and Martin have only one girl child, Milika. Doreen admits that the desire for a son affects them both, although the husband suffers more because he cannot get the son he craves.

The impact of patriarchy in the society as shown in *Parched Earth* is on both male and female characters. The novel uses the analogy of 'spider web' to explain the trick situation of male characters under patriarchy. The narrator explains how patriarchy as an ideology in which men who are considered beneficiaries, also suffer in the process of nurturing it. The narrator insists that the spider spins its web for trapping others into its power and into death but, unfortunately, the web sometimes traps its own kind. The narrator shows that men set rules and regulations which suppress and subordinate women but, eventually, the same rules victimize them.

Female characters in *Parched Earth*, do not encourage separation or

divorce as a way of fighting against patriarchy or solving marital problems attributable to patriarchal operations. The text recognizes the value of marriage institution even as they expose the effects of patriarchy. Female characters in the novel appear to encourage women to wage war against patriarchy without losing faith in marriage for the benefit of their families.

Lema was born in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. She got her first degree in literature in English at the University of Dar es Salaam and later master's degree in creative writing at San Francisco State University in the States.

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#### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**[Elizabeth Kweka (EK) ; Elieshi Lema (EL)]**

**EK:** Different from other female writers in Tanzania like Sophia Mustapha and Martha Mvungi, you are the first Tanzanian female writer who has written a novel that has drawn attention. What made you enter into this area of creative writing which actually has been a male preserve for a long time?

**EL:** First of all, I started writing when I had already grown up. And my first fascination with writing was when I studied literature at the University of Dar es Salaam. I was fascinated because I went to University of Dar Es Salaam as mature entrant and I had been working at the library and it was like I saw that the world has so many books. I did not really know how one produces a book or how do people write. After joining the university I thought I should join a publishing house, and joined Tanzania Publishing House as a fourth term, we call it practical. I learnt about publishing and I just started writing. I just started writing and I do not remember if there was any influence from outside. It was unconscious. Perhaps I had always been a writer but I did not have the opportunity to write. I was not aware that creative writing was a male preserve, and I am glad I wasn't because may be it might have intimidated me. I just wrote the story that I wanted to write. I was not even aware that publishers were biased against the works by or about women. You know when you come across knowledge you do not first say who has given me this knowledge, you just read first and later find to know the writer. Even at a certain level you do not care if that person is a man or a woman. And possibly it might be because I was raised only by my mother, and to me she has been the authority figure throughout my life. This could be the reason why I did not see if there was any difference that exists between men and women even in publishing.

**EK:** How important was reading when you started to write?

**EL:** Reading was very important to me because I was fascinated by books. And it was so hard to access books and schools were the only places where one could find books. And at least there were books at the time I went to school. Now the situation is worse, there are no books in schools. At least that familiarity was there but outside the school there were no books because I grew up in the village. So when I came to Dar es Salaam and worked in the library it is when I found a whole world of books. And I loved reading.

**EK:** Who were your models when you started to write?

**EL:** I think I should be fair to the works I have read and say when I was reading I had internalized certain styles of writing. But really I cannot say I had a model.

**EK:** How have previous African female writers helped you?

**EL:** Most African female writers who write about women write about a woman in African society. And the African society is similar, speaking of patriarchy for example it is all over, so if Ama Ata Aidoo write about patriarchy in West Africa, Elieshi Lema writes about patriarchy in Tanzania or East Africa they may be writing about the same thing. May be the difference is on how the writers approach it, how they express it. But learning how another person handles the same subject is also a different thing. We have been so much wrapped up about woman's situation in African society. It is always about her struggle with her man, her children, the land in a patriarchal society, and sometimes as a writer I think I should move from there and create a role model of a different kind of a woman. It is therefore a

challenge to us female writers writing about Africa, we need to write about women doing things at international levels, and the activists have to help at a certain level so that when there is a transformation on the side of women we write about it. And the transformation has already occurred and there are a lot of successful women out there.

**EK:** Do you write for an ideal reader or a particular audience?

**EL:** For children's books I write for a particular audience, for adult readers I write for everyone. For example with *Parched Earth* I was appealing to a person who would understand what I am trying to say, that I am trying to unpack patriarchy because patriarchy is analytical. That patriarchy is not about men or women but the whole society. Take an example of Godbless and his mother, no one is better than the other they are both victims of patriarchy. And there are many Godblesses out there, patriarchy is not something that we should embrace. We have this situation of alternatives to marriages, now that men are having sexual relationship with their fellow men and women with their fellow women, I see it as a failure of patriarchy. It is about the individuals struggling against the situation that is not appealing to them, and it has taken a very long time to come to the open. The foundation, patriarchy, is breaking down but we should not watch it breaking down and swallow us with it we should see what alternatives to take. Because these are life systems and they are created by people and are broken by people. Look at Joseph, he was such a beneficiary of the privileges of patriarchy and he did not know when it just swept under his feet and was left alone, in extreme loneliness.

**EK:** Was *Parched Earth* your first work of art or first work of art to be published?

**EL:** It was a first book, but it was not the first thing I had written. There is a whole novel of about three hundred pages which I have not published because somehow I could not conclude it.

**EK:** What is it about?

**EL:** The same thing about boy child and land. And I was informed by my society, the Chagga society. It is about two brothers, one with only one child, a girl and the other with three boys and two girls. The father gives the two sons an equal amount of land each and that is where the friction begins and continues in the family for about three generations. You see, I did not know what conclusion I will give about the issue of land in the Chagga society.

**EK:** Which African writers and works do you inspire most?

**EL:** Practically everybody, because for example if I read Chinua Achebe, he has written a lot of political novels and I am interested to see how he handles them, also women writers who are mostly engaged in writing about women situation. Chimamanda is moving into the political arena and possibly this is influence by Achebe but she also writes about different things, for example *Purple Hibiscus* which in my view is a very strong novel. She is talking of the modern family and the issue of religion where the woman is struggling in that situation, she is still the helpless, she cannot do anything, and she is roughly handled, mishandled. Generally, I enjoy reading all African writers because it is also important to know what other writers are saying.

**EK:** You own a publication house, was it because of rejection in other publication houses as it has happened to most African female writers in the previous years?

**EL:** No. I own a Publication house because I wanted to be a publisher. It has nothing to do with rejection because I never took my work to any publication house. The publication house came first and then *Parched Earth*.

**EK:** If one says you are a feminist, will you say yes?

**EL:** Yes of course. I am a woman and I look at the world from a perspective of my being a woman and my reactions to things are based on my being a woman. As a feminist, I believe in transformation and no transformation which comes by just waiting, one has to act to bring transformation.

**EK:** In *Parched Earth*, Doreen's marriage is in frustrations because they have no son.

**EL:** This is patriarchy. You must have someone, that child has to be a man and these two people who love each other absolutely, that love is suddenly destroyed by the absence of a son and even the source of

happiness they get from their child, that colour is diminished by the fact that the child is not a boy. The relatives comes and question why they love each other and this is how patriarchy weaves in a person and completely tears the individual apart. So Doreen is finding her own way although she encounters cold, hot water as she swims and this shows how patriarchy interferes with individuals life, and you cannot run away from it because that is how it is and the society is weaved like that. So it either consumes you completely or you struggle with it.

**EK:** It seems that love between partners in African context cannot exist when the woman has failed to have children, especially sons.

**EL:** The issue of a son is very common that you cannot remove it from patriarchy. The whole thing about patriarchy is about the system that is weaved to give them privileges they have acquired for themselves and the woman is given the position of serving their interests. They own means of production, they own knowledge, and they own everything, Therefore when the marriage has no son who is going to take over the privileges it is always a problem. So it is about the survival of patriarchy rather than marriage.

**EK:** Are these two different things?

**EL:** You are made to think it is one because they want you to think it is one, but they are two different things.

**EK:** In *Parched Earth*, marriage does not seem to be a blessing because both married Doreen and unmarried Foibe end up in total frustrations.

**EL:** I say marriage is like walking in the rain. It drenches you. You are totally drenched and you keep on walking. In fact, I do not say that marriage should not be there but I say marriage is like walking in the rain. Walk in it if you want, take an umbrella if you want, that is what it is. You know there are certain things you cannot say they are good or bad because we get into it willingly, nobody forces you. There are forced marriages but even in those forced marriages you can get out if you want.

**EK:** But it is difficult to get out of marriage once you are in!

**EL:** Yes of course it is. In one of the sections they talk about revolutionary impulse ( section two I think), where wholeness seems impossible. Marriage anywhere is in that situation, there is no total happiness, and there is no situation that gives you total happiness. Aunt Mai has stayed in marriage and she has found her own way, aunt Mai's negotiations skills are excellent and that is why she has succeeded to stay. She knows the reality of marriage, and the reality of patriarchy.

**EK:** You included about three generations in Doreen's family. Do these generations represent something different?

**EL:** The earth walk I am talking about tells you something different is not going to be there. We are the same people, same society, and patriarchy is still there but we talk about how different people and characters have sorted out their lives. Foibe's mother does not fight, but Aunt Mai does and takes Foibe to live with her. Therefore it is about how one negotiate with the system, you cannot do these things in one generation because you have to show how this web is tied up together and how people are moving within it.

**EK:** There is a lot of intertextuality in the narrative what can you tell us about Joseph Jastrab in your writing, here I am talking about *Sacred manhood, Sacred earth*.

**EL:** You know I read that book because it is about people who go into the world and sort themselves. Therefore in my own analysis I thought this is what we are really doing; you go out there in total silence and sort yourself out. Both men and women are in a state of confusion but what they need to know is what is confusing them. But also there is Andrea Dowrkin, who looks at sex and says it is not a private thing at all.

**EK:** What does that mean?

**EL:** Because sex is conditioned, sex gives you a boy or a girl child, it makes you have it with someone with a certain social position and not anybody.

- EK:** Doreen does not care much about the absent father. Is it because she is expecting to have a husband as a male figure in her life?
- EL:** Doreen does not need the father as much as Godbless does. Godbless is the boychild and is supposed to be on a pedestal, he is supposed to be assured of him (his father) he needs assurance but the father who is supposed to value him as a male child does not recognize him. So the one who was supposed to be on a pedestal is suddenly in the dust with the other one, the girl. So here Doreen does not see the need, she has shaped the life of that family with her mother, but Godbless needs to be accepted as a man, he needs privileges as a special child and he is not getting it and in order to get it he is supposed to have a father.
- EK:** So the problem is recognition!
- EL:** Yes the one to put him on a pedestal is a man not a woman though after the recognition he does not need him anymore because he recognizes that he cannot give him anything. He breaks the bubble after knowing him he wonders what is so special about him.
- EK:** Does the novel suggest that those who do not know their fathers should not bother because it is possible it will not make any difference ?
- EL:** What I want to say is if you are a boy child born of a woman and the man does not recognize you, shape your life, one should not kill himself over the failure to know his father.
- EK:** What challenges have you faced as a writer?
- EL:** Time is the biggest challenge. To be a writer and a publisher and female human being because I do not write before doing research.
- EK:** May be you are devoting too much time in publishing.
- EL:** You know there are things you would want them to be there very long time after you are gone and so you put so much energy into it. But that would also mean that you do not have time to write, the time to go for research,
- EK:** Are telling us that you are not going to write anymore?
- EL:** I am going to write, surely I am going to write if God gives me life, but I will have to know first who will carry on this, because publishing in Tanzania is so difficult, extremely difficult.
- EK:** Why?
- EL:** I mean you are bringing out products that people do not need, but you have to do that because it necessary for any society to have publications. So you do not leave this and run off and look for something which is easy and so you say I am committed to it and it is part of me.
- EK:** In reading *Parched Earth* sometimes I wonder where the love story is.
- EL:** There are many love stories. Foibe and her children, Doreen and Martin and others. The issue here is the influence of patriarchy in each love story. I am not telling that love story in one straight line because the only thing that is straight is patriarchy. There is no story of happy forever after.
- EK:** But the times of happiness are too short.
- EL:** Perhaps we could say that is the limitation of literature, we just have to say what we have to say in a certain frame.
- EK:** One expected that *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* would be another feminist novel – do you think you wrote everything about women in *Parched Earth*?
- EL:** I wrote a lot about women in *Parched Earth* but you know *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* is gendered, Sarah's parents, Sarah herself is brilliant, the confidence she has is not found in many women.
- EK:** Does the novel suggest a way of life for girls?
- EL:** The novel actually suggests how one can find his or her way out. Being who you are using the capacities that God has given you and you make it. And talking about liberation, Sarah in that novel is liberated.

- EK:** *Parched Earth* suggests that extra marital affairs can strengthen ones marriage!
- EL:** I am going to say it again, searching for oneself, one should remove the social walls. It is about looking for a person who respects your opinions because you are you and forget about being married to someone. Doreen goes out and meets someone who listens to her. But in the text and our society to be seen with a male colleague is not normal. We are in the sheath of not allowing ourselves to see two people together. In patriarchal society it seems that you have shaken what was stable and calm. Questions like why do you talk to him, why does he have to teach you art, why not your fellow woman are questions a woman should expect. And if there are no women who can teach art to their fellow women then women should not learn it, one should be happy and satisfied that she is married, why look for other men to talk to.
- EK:** What about strengthening marriage?
- EL:** It helps a woman to see herself and the situation she is in. Doreen would love Martin with certain openness, certain understanding but where was she to get another standing at the time the wall of a need for a son encompassed their marriage.
- EK:** So it is about one abandoning her position?
- EL:** Doreen refuses to maintain her position when she meets Joseph, because as a woman she is expected to struggle in that position and never to move away, because by doing that she is assuring the system will remain intact but then she meets Joseph who is already broken by patriarchy.
- EK:** Can we talk of the extent it serves the marriage? Because the novel does not say much about the life of Doreen with Joseph and what really happens in her life with Martin.
- EL:** It is a suggestion but marriages are very varied. Doreen is in search for that love that has caused to exist between her and Martin because Martin has been emasculated, that he cannot have a son.
- EK:** But still it is not easy to apply in our society
- EL:** Which society because marriages run in hypocrisy. If the writer wants to write about swimming in this hypocrisy, then one should not write. When I wrote *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* some people said I am encouraging prostitution. The issue is that people have girlfriends and do whatever they want with them but when I write about Sarah, to them is prostitution. People judge so much in order to remain safe in this hypocrisy, so as a writer I deal with this aspect of hypocrisy.
- EK:** You write in English while the larger part of the audience around (Tanzanians) speaks Swahili and cannot read and understand English.
- EL:** I have answered this question many times and I say a book chooses its language, or may be the subject you want to talk about chooses its language, the question is which language enables you to express yourself the way you want .But also when you are writing your audience is not only the speakers of that language and if that is the case there is a chance for the book to be translated. I write children's books in Swahili because I am talking to children.
- EK:** Thanks for your time
- EL:** You are welcome!
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