

# The Importance of Feminist Ethnography in Modern Folklore Studies

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**Abstract-** Ethnography is the research method that describes a culture and its “wisdom” as its members share implied common meanings in their habits, attitudes, beliefs and values systems and symbols i.e. in everything that composes their culture. Ethnography is also interested on the reasons for changing the culture and/or the ways of disrupting and restoring the dominant cultural class. So it is obvious that every folk group is ideal for ethnographic analysis.

**Index Terms-** Feminism, Ethnography, Folk Studies, Approach

**R**esearch fields and traditional folklore have analytical purposes. They are governed by fundamental principles and conceptual frameworks in order to formulate their questions that need to be answered. Ethnography that has been widening in Folklore Studies over the last decades is the method that describes a culture and its “wisdom”. Ethnography approaches the members of this particular culture as its expressions and carriers as they share tacitly common meanings of their habits, their attitudes, beliefs and their value systems, their symbols and in everything that composes their culture. However, is the ethnographic method really interested in the reasons of cultural change and/or ways of restoration of the dominant cultural class? Ethnography is interested in understanding the fragile and fluid nature of social control processes, as well as the rules that the society members make to maintain their cultural boundaries. At its center the belief exists that human behavior is the product of social life, and this explains its interest about the individual within the group or the community, as well as the “practice” of everyday life, the lived experience. So, it is obvious that every folk group is offered for ethnographic analysis.

The issue about the accession of the feminist Ethnography into Folklore Studies is linked to the practical and analytical work of the researchers and the cover of the gap between their expectation and the reality. It is not surprising that many folklorists admit that when they start using Ethnography in their research they experience a crisis of self-confidence, and they need special perseverance and effort to achieve it. It is natural to wonder about where they will start and equally natural to be concerned about the fact that Ethnography is a time-consuming and costly research method. In any case, both the time available and the involved cost vary according to the plans and aspirations of male and female researchers. At the same time, it remains the fact that field research is currently being carried out in much easier conditions, especially in terms of technological equipment than in the past. Through the use of film and video during the research field we have a new section for folklore, the “Optical Folklore”. The importance of Optical Folklore is that it offers important knowledge about the significant “Other”, especially in the field of symbolic systems and behaviors, contributing to the revelation of structures and recording heterogeneity [1]. Also, it has greatly facilitated access to pre-existing surveys and studies and the volume of existing knowledge often covers the ethnographer's lack of experience.

Feminist Folklore as mentioned above has led to the conclusion that male and often female folklorists have failed to understand the real dimensions of the female worlds in the traditional communities that they have explored. The feminist perception in Folklore and Ethnographic Studies challenges the female and male observers/researchers of traditional communities that they considered that women were granted in them. They often used the phrase “They were just there” and they were not interested in discovering the important of their social roles in their communities. Most folklore surveys lead to the conclusion that traditional communities consist mainly of men, and the usual reference to women identifies them as the mothers or spouses of these men. When feminist folklorists rethink today the investigations of the past, they can approach the women of traditional communities with the help of the analytical category of gender. Especially the women who are excluded from ownership and production, as a symbolic chapter, useful in the field of men’s exchange and negotiation [2] closely associated with the custom of the dowry. It is no coincidence that in many and different societies the historical connection of monogamy to the land property has been established, since it preserves not only the property but also the production relations. Normally, at least in Greece, the dowry is not a traditional custom or universal phenomenon of Greek traditional society, the “which is maintained over the centuries as a survivor” [3], but it is a changing phenomenon that depends on the current social and economic conditions [4].

Also, in the most communities that investigated by folklorists, the reproductive role of women was greatly underestimated as it was under the control of their husbands and their family environment. Women in traditional communities worked for a long period of their lives as men “producers”, which ensured at the “lucky” ones social recognition and prestige [5]. This is a part of the wider social control that exists for the women in traditional communities, that grid of methods with which the community leads its members to adopt behaviors, measures, rules of morality, etc. which they consider socially “normal” and “good” and which have a strong gender dimension. In traditional (and in some contemporary) societies, the myths and fairy tales, the collective community imaginary and its representations, the “forbidden” and the indolent, etc. are important tools of community control and a fact that is profoundly political. Thus, we think it is necessary in the above context the review of a series of “sensitive” issues from a gender perspective. For example, the extent and content of femininity, the violence against women and in particular their involuntary abductions that often resulted in the obligation to marry their rapist, the family and community control of virginity and its function as a material value during the wedding negotiations, the gender division of ethics, the concepts of honor and shame, and their connection to the community post of male superiority, etc. From our point of view folklorists, especially in Greece, can no longer treat sexuality as a taboo or as non-existent in the context of folk culture [6]. About fifteen years ago, in Finnish folklore Sarkar-Arola [7] speaking about the “heterosexual matrix” studied the construction of heterosexuality in her work “Magic, Body and Social Order” through the customs and rituals of pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum. In their context heterosexuality does not arise “naturally”, but it is constructed socially, it is not self-evident and that is why it needs to be evident through ritual and often magic. Also the Discourse that their members articulate and which is very important to feminist ethnographers and/or the ritual speech as it is recorded, it often conceals and reveals, apart from the genders, other kinds of irresistible instincts [7]. We should not forget that Rousseau [8] is the first who introduced the view/idea about linking gender inequality to individual property and surplus wealth. Engels [9] accepts this opinion and recognizes gender asymmetry as a primary and fundamental distinction and provides the major difficulties of its overcome. But all these symbolic structures, rituals, etc. can only investigated in connection with the difficulties and obstacles which arise from the socio-economic conditions that govern the lives of the people of the different communities and which are the basis of a difficult daily routine. However, we do not claim that women have been inactive victims at the male-dominated traditional communities of which they were members.

On the contrary women have always been visible and with a continuous presence in folk culture, unlike the “other”, the folk culture in which they were not invisible and their presence was occasional and discontinuous. The presence of women in folk culture governs by a dialectic contrast: from the one they consent, accept and internalize the mastery of men and on the other hand, they are not remaining non-participatory or passive. They interfere in the creation of this culture, influence its formation, enrich it and become not only its operators but also those who transmit it to future generations [10] [11]. In the framework of folk culture, the negotiating power of women is visible. Women play a decisive role in the shape and operation of the community structures, such as neighborhood communication networks [1] or female networks that perform religious duties. And if in the real world women need to confront with the prevailing community ideology and its grid of gender prejudices claiming a place in the public life; in the sphere of magic and metaphysics they appear to dominate [1].

Women have been displaced from the world of rationalism, i.e. from the logic of the social organization where men prevail, they turn to the world of the irrational and the transcendental, to the one which consists of religion, dreams, riots, spells and mischief, mediation with the transcendent, care of the dead, passports and especially the rites of transition to the “other world” [12]. It is not difficult to link the ambiguity of the woman's position with her unbroken resistance and the conflict that this entails. Its dedication to religious function is without a doubt an effective way of entering the public space from the other door. Exactly the same ambiguity has the Fairies which an essential feature of social life [13].

Feminist folklorists soon understood that they called, through Ethnography, to overcome the andocentric of the dominant research. They study the different categories of women within the same community or group, reveal all their real living conditions, break the patriarchal silence that surrounds them and evaluate their social contribution. Searching through Ethnography the female worlds and their essence, it is necessary to take into account the fact that usually the unequal and discrete relationships within the traditional communities and other folk groups are surrounded by the strongest with prestige, leading to their deterioration, the prestige to intensify [1]. So, in spite of the depreciation that has been for a rather long time, folklorists with a conscience of gender can boast that they have contributed and they continue to make a significant contribution to the new orientations of folk science and, in particular, to its negotiation with post modernity [14]. They also considered the issues of interdisciplinary, gender-specific and inter culturality crucial for the evolution of science [11]. At the same time, they highlighted the importance of ethnographic research on Folklore and they argued that the detailed categories “Gender” and “Sexuality” often guided both the choice of the research method and the phenomena they decided to study. In their view, the relationships between theory and research, but also the relationship between science itself and the folklorists is becoming more fluid, as open discussions substitute planned interviews and friendly relationships substitute standardized relationships between researchers and their research subjects [6] [11]. This is the collective

process where researchers and participants in research negotiate meanings, identities and texts, with the last ones to intervene decisively in the process and interpretation. Finally, they argued that Ethnography, which includes in its context the category of the “Other”, is crucial for modern folklore studies [14].

Feminist ethnographic research in modern folk studies is based on the following axes: a) the recognition of gender diversity, b) the necessity and the importance of a survey that focuses on women under their own perspective, c) the initiation of the research with an in-depth study of the social status of women and the predominant community culture of genders, the exploration of those factors that explain the inferiority and subordination of women, or the forms of power which they have, d) The historical evolution and possible differences in the social roles of genders and the historical relationships between them in combination with the changes in reproductive forces and relationships that may have occurred in the community, e) the critical evaluation of data from a gender perspective. However, it is important to point out that all the above is not an easy task, in the absence of more comparable information, but sometimes also of the inability of members of the community or of the folk group to the researchers intentions. However, as Sachs [15] notes researching rural women's groups, studying the invisible, looking at the unpretentious, looking to find out why a series of events (many of which are associated with peasants) are systematically ignored. By mimicking Stone [16] and paraphrasing her, we would speak of Ethnography of “neglected knowledge” which among other things explores how and why the knowledge associates with the female reality, and in the context of the folkloric studies deleted or is not part of the scientific rules. And this is exactly which makes feminist Ethnography valuable to the women of Folklore: the fact that it makes the invisible visible, the insignificant significant the fact that it puts women in its "scene" as worthwhile "actors" approaches them as subjects rather than objects. Beyer and Holtzblatt [17] point that Ethnography: a) articulates the uninhabited and silent knowledge that is essential to the success of research and b) in its context usually insignificants or invisible details are transformed into visible and exploitable research material. The introduction of feminist Ethnography into Folklore Studies was based on the dual status of women researchers as folklorists and women. Women researchers have managed to prove that the focus on the lives of women in traditional communities and folk groups had as consequence the redefinition of men's life [18] [19]. At the same time, they proposed to the predominantly male models of folk theory alternative and often oppositional models that integrate female experience into the study of folk culture [10] [11]. Also, they highlighted the importance of ethnographic research in Folklore and they supported how the analytical categories of “Gender” and “Sexuality” have often both guided researchers to the choice of the research method and its subject.

In conclusion, we note that Ethnography in the context of Folklore Studies, apart from gender relations, can of course have as its object the real and symbolic universe of a community or folk groups, customs, habits, networks of cooperation, exchange, power structures, etc. What, however, is the emergence of the world of the community or of the folk group from the perspective of its own “actors”. Ethnography must be the product of cooperation and its content to be judged and accepted by the subjects of the research as a reasonable and adequate description [20]. The younger generation of women and men folklorists has now surpassed the arbitrary and deeply ideological division between folk and traditional culture. They focus on “folk cultures”, on the interactions of the specific cultural systems; they explore the role of modern folk culture and its actors, the folk groups of the city in its political and social life. We could say that in a totally unusual way we are inadvertently returning to a similar proposal by Herder, at least a century before the appearance of Sociology, Folklore and Anthropology. This new concept of folk culture results in a transformation of modern folkloric studies and the redefinition of many of their research fields that characterized by interdisciplinarity.

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