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Film Review

“Rivers of Sand” Film Review

The film “Rivers of Sand” explores the gender roles and level of subserviency among the Hamar people of southeast Ethiopia in a cultural context. The Hamar people are a mid-size community comprised of family units that live in permanent and semi-permanent homes. They are a people of many modes of subsistence including hunting and gathering, farming, and herding as they have adjusted to the harsh and unforgiving environment. Within Hamar culture, there are specific gender and age roles for women, men, and children that are adorned to magical and ritual rites. These roles will be explored along with a comparison of the institution of marriage and role of women in a marriage to western society, namely the United States.

The role of women in Hamar society is to act as the primary provider and caretaker of the entire family unit. A woman is born into an inherently subservient role as property of her father, catering to his needs and helping her mother with womanly services around the household. When she marries, there is a shift in allegiance from her father to her new husband and his family. The duties of a woman in her new household include bearing children which she must then look after, she is expected to provide water, continuous sources of grain, and provide for the extraneous needs of her husband and in-laws. She is also expected to gracefully accept beatings from her husband as a recognition of custom and his superiority. Ultimately, the role of women in Hamar society is to submit fully to the demands of her elders and husband. She is not free to marry who she wishes, as marriages are an economic transaction, and she lives a life of

routine and caregiving. The women in Hamar society recognize this as the given circumstance and willingly participate in the institutions that act to instill a hierarchy. If they do not submit, there are dire consequences that could result in serious harm to them and inability to care for their children, their primary motivator.

The role of men in Hamar society drastically differs from that of women, as they act as the spiritual leaders and hunters in Hamar society. They are viewed as the superior gender and have many ceremonies attached to manhood such as the coming of age ritual ceremony sequence in which maturity is decided and a boy may now become a man and yield a whip. Until a man marries, it is his mother that provides him with basic necessities, such as water, along with extravagencies, such as an evening coffee. When he marries, that responsibility transfers to the wife just as she transfers from her father to her husband. It is expected that the wife represents her husband well with adornments of beads and rings as well as replicating the scars he bears from defeating an enemy. The men also bear symbolic jewelry and body modifications that show their hunting success and societal ranking.

Comparing the system of marriage defined among the Hamar people in “Rivers and Sand” to the system of marriage in western society, one can draw similarities and differences. The main difference between the institution in the two societies is the structure of the institution itself. Unlike Hamar society, marriage in western culture is largely by choice. While there may be economic, social, or political benefits, most people in western society marry for love and have the choice of divorce if the marriage is no longer desirable. There are also similarities, however, in the structure of marriage between both societies. In the US, one cannot marry until they are 18 years old, without parental consent, similar to how a boy cannot take a wife in Hamar society until he has gone through the coming of age rituals and grown body hair. Both societies limit the minimum maturity allowed for marriage. Another similarity is the role of women within the family

unit. While domestic abuse is profusely looked down upon in western society, the responsibilities of taking care of the children, husband, and household mirror Hamar society. In the US, the accepted and historically maintained role of women has been providing care to her family and completing all the tasks that she is not deemed too weak for and are consequently the man's responsibility. Other societal institutions such as law enforcement agencies and successful industrial agriculture distinguishes the social customs of the United States from the Hamar people, but it is not long ago in our history that the tendency of domestic abuse and subservient positions of women were commonly practiced and accepted norms of marital behavior.