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A Great Novel in a “Small” Language: Representations of the African Intellectual in the Eritrean Novel *Tebereh’s Shop*

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ABSTRACT

Tebereh’s Shop (2003) is a remarkable novel written in Tigrinya, an important Horn of Africa literary language spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia. It was written by Beyene Haile, an Eritrean novelist-cum-painter-cum-sculptor, who, though less known outside Africa, is regarded by his critics as one of the continent’s major writers, contemporarily publishing in indigenous languages. The novel deals with the role of African intellectuals in the trajectory of nation-building and is framed within the context of political and economic adversity created by war and domestic repression. Published after three years of the end of the 1998–2000 border conflict between the neighboring countries of Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the Eritrean government’s subsequent deferral of the constitution, closure of the free press, and detention of its political opponents, the novel paints a highly controversial image of intellectuals while at the same time charting a newly fangled and brilliant, even where it is romantic, task for them.

INTRODUCTION

The novel under discussion is in Tigrinya, a “small” yet important Horn of Africa literary language spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Written by Beyene Haile and published in 2003, its title in Tigrinya is *Deqwan Tebereh*. A formal translation of the novel into English does not yet exist. For the sake of simplicity, it will be referred to here as *Tebereh’s Shop*, an English conversion of the same title. Beyene Haile is an Eritrean novelist, painter, and sculptor. He is, arguably, the

country's most important contemporary writer. His work is informed by a mixture of African storytelling tradition and a Western novelistic style that betrays the influences of modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques.

This paper seeks to explore and discuss the novel's thematic and narrative concerns. In particular, it examines the extent to which *Tebereh's Shop* succeeds (or fails) in articulating and representing the role of the African (and specifically, the Eritrean) intellectual as a historical agent of change within the framework of the emergent country's task of nation-building and development. This analysis is based on a critical reading of the novel, interviews and conversations with the author, and reader-response research¹ conducted in Eritrea's capital, Asmara, in 2005; my approach also benefits from other creative and critical sources for purposes of comparative analysis and conceptual framing. Since the novel's thematic concern and its complex narrative mode are under-girded by the Eritrean politics of the postindependence era, a synopsis of the political context against which it is set will also be included. Moreover, as Haile and his works are, presumably, unknown (or very little known) outside the country, a brief biographical profile and a sketch of his oeuvre, primarily focusing on those points pertinent to the discussion, are provided before passing to the main analytical description of the novel, *Tebereh's Shop*.

(CON)TEXT

Tebereh's Shop deals with Eritrean independence, and particularly with the role and responsibility of "intellectuals" in the postindependence era. Although intellectuals—and members of the intelligentsia generally—are depicted throughout the novel as a group endowed with the capacity to act as agents of historical and social change, a particular section of that group is also treated with striking denigration and scorn. An understanding of Eritrea's recent history and the visions of Eritrea's postindependence leadership is critical to an appreciation of the political and historical backdrop of the novel, and to a comprehension of the complex ways in which the novel negotiates or seeks to negotiate with that particular historico-political context, which, at the same time, permits and constrains its (relative) autonomy as a (literary) text.

One of Africa's newer nations, Eritrea gained its independence from neighboring Ethiopia in 1993, following a bloody, protracted war of thirty years that ended in 1991. After securing its hard-won freedom, Eritrea started out with the promise of becoming, literally and figuratively, the *wunderkind* of Africa. Reconstruction efforts skyrocketed within a short period. A legal constitution, which would set the country on the path toward democracy and justice, was drafted and ratified through popular participation. Encouraged by this, Eritreans collectively felt that they were in some sort of earthly "heaven," in a "golden era, when everything seemed possible" (Wrong 360), while the nation's new leaders, rumor had it, were heard boasting of creating another Singapore (modern, prosperous, and stable) in Africa. International praise followed. The reputation of the guerilla-movement-turned-government-regime of the EPLF, historically potent enough to rally huge popular support, steadily improved. What, a few years earlier, "U.S. intelligence experts [had] consider[ed] the most sophisticated guerilla" (Kaplan 50) movement in existence transformed itself into that many observers

(including the Clinton administration²) regarded as an uncorrupted and effective “new leadership” that could set an example for the rest of the continent, capable of “spearheading a much-needed African Renaissance” (Wrong 15). The postcolonial government’s ideology of “self-reliance [which] was the watch word” (15)³ reinforced the country’s international image of being able again to pull it off all on its own and—to borrow Dan Connell’s telling phrase—“Against All Odds.”⁴ Unfortunately, the programmed rebuilding of the country’s war-ruined economic base and superstructure faltered quickly following the outbreak of a new and widely-publicized border war with Ethiopia between 1998–2000. Subsequently, in September 2001, a few days after the tragedy of September 11th had gripped global attention, Eritrea’s postcolonial government, in an effort to silence rising domestic criticism, deferred the country’s constitution and instituted a crackdown on opposition groups and civil society. As Dan Connell, a veteran observer of Eritrea, put it: “The main blow came in September 2001, following al-Qaeda’s attacks in New York and Washington and the Bush administration’s declaration of a global ‘war on terrorism.’ With the world’s attention thus diverted, [President] Isayas ordered the arrest of the G-15 [a group of 15 leading politicians], the closure of the country’s entire private press, and the detention of the offending media’s leading editors and reporters” (Connell 13).

Since then, as reported by opposition websites, international publications, and independent observers, the political and human rights situations in Eritrea have further deteriorated, resulting in, among other things, the closure of several churches, the dismantlement of the university, and the imprisonment and disappearance of numerous individuals.⁵ As of the time that this paper was written, the border dispute remains unresolved, as Ethiopia’s government refuses to honor an international court ruling demanding its withdrawal from areas awarded to Eritrea, and, consequently, a United Nations peacekeeping mission (the UNMEE) continues to guard a fragile peace between the two countries.

BACKGROUND TO THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORKS

Tigrinya, the language Beyene Haile writes in, is spoken by roughly five million people, and many others use it as a “language of communication” in Eritrea and Ethiopia, giving Tigrinya “the third position among the modern Semitic languages, after Arabic and Amharic” (Voigt 68). Compared to many other African languages, it has long religious and literary traditions, dating at least to the nineteenth century (Negash, *History* 68–78). Haile lived in Ethiopia for many years, and moved to Eritrea after the country gained its independence. A graduate in public administration from Beirut University, he has traveled widely in Africa as an organizational consultant and management trainer, and has lived and worked in the United States and Western Europe. Though also a talented painter and sculptor, he is primarily known in Eritrea as a writer of great skill and philosophical depth. For many admirers, in fact, he has acquired the cult status of a literary and intellectual guru. Though no one contests his talent, he, however, is also viewed as a controversial figure by some, who accuse him of elitism and political ambiguity.

Haile published his first novel about forty years ago. As I have extensively discussed elsewhere (Negash, *History* 159–65; “Deqwan Teberah”; *Nai Deresti Natsnet* 117–24), Haile’s 1965 debut novel, *Abidu’do Teblewo?* (henceforth referred

to as “*Madness*”⁶), differs from conventional Tigrinya writing in at least three fundamental ways. First, it takes an intellectual and artist as its main character, and tells his story with compelling force and narrative skill. Wounded by life, the central character of the novel, young painter-cum-sculptor Mezgebe Amanuel uses his art to heal his wounds and those of others in a manner that borders on insanity. Another experimental and innovative element of the novel is its narrative structure. In sharp contrast to the literary convention of its day, the book begins with the “end,” and moves forward and backward through flashbacks, images, and repressed and activated memories as we see the protagonist striving to make sense of his life, which, for him, is synonymous with his work. This feature places *Madness* squarely in the realm of the experimental modernism of writers such as Virginia Wolfe, James Joyce, and William Faulkner. Considering that Tigrinya literature at that time was entrenched in the mode of verisimilar linear narrative, this was quite revolutionary. Another significant element of *Madness* was the introduction new concepts into Tigrinya. The genre of novel, for example, came to be viewed as more than narrative and words such as “art” and “aesthetics” have become associated with it. The book also taught its readers that telling a story was a pleasure, but writing a novel also required dedication, ability, and hard work.

Teberēh’s Shop (2003), a sizeable book of about four hundred pages, is, in a sense, an artistic and intellectual re-articulation of *Madness*. Like *Madness*, it is narrated through the stream-of-consciousness technique, and features artistic characters. But it also opens up new technical possibilities and thematic frontiers. It opens with the monologues of two writers, one dead and one alive. In addition to the “association of ideas” device, it also uses magical realism and “collage-like” imagery to carry and coalesce the stories of different characters, some of whom are supernatural beings who move about freely in time and space, relating Eritrean history in an epic manner.

At the technical-narrative level, the book is woven together with embedded stories that overlap each other; it is packed, too, with long, unpunctuated, breathless sentences, as well as dialogue, plays within the text, endless philosophical and psychological proings, and many other learned allusions and inter-textualities, which (at times overtly and at other times covertly) seem to converse with both African and Western authors and manuscripts. For this reason, the novel has generally been regarded as a “difficult” read, especially for young readers. Even so, far from being contrived or pretentious, the novel is genuinely complex because of its self-reflexiveness, which forms part of the larger textual design. Indeed, as the author asserts through one of his characters, the novel’s intricate parts are intended to be taken “like a song the meaning of which you don’t understand but still like” (50).

THEME, CHARACTERIZATION, AND REPRESENTATION IN *TEBEREH’S SHOP*

The grand theme of *Teberēh’s Shop* is the independence of Eritrea, and the cultural, political, and economic problems that have followed independence. The novel spans the years beginning on the eve of independence to our present time. Most of the characters are intellectuals, artists, or individuals with an artistic inclination,

members of the diasporic Eritrean communities. There are also ordinary citizens and former freedom-fighters, who come together to celebrate freedom and reconstruct and build their country. Though they share this common ground, they are divided as to how to go about the task of rebuilding. Like all pioneers, their perspectives and means of approach vary and are subject to change, and they are constantly faced with questions such as: "How should we reconstruct the country?" "How can we help?" "Which way or model of development to choose?" "What is the meaning of independence?" "What does freedom mean, what does it not mean?" etc.

In its treatment of artistic and intellectual characters, *Tebereh's Shop* invites comparisons with the novel *In Arcadia* published in 2002 by Ben Okri (Nigerian novelist and 1991 Booker Prize winner). Okri's novel depicts some of the most interesting, dynamic, complex, and anxiety-ridden artists and artistic characters in literature, who find themselves in perpetual struggle to regain their lost or never-found happiness and fulfillment. Okri's characters seek to secure their "paradise lost," as the author puts it, through a journey to a space called "Arcadia," which is the "special place" located "between [the] seeking and finding." Okri's notion of Arcadia is decidedly metaphorical, but also operates at a worldlier, more mundane level. When understood in real terms, and depending on what people are seeking in specific contexts, that journey towards Arcadia, the searching for something or somebody or going somewhere, may also mean the actual culmination of a dream long deferred: "That [what] we call Arcadia, [may be] a place that for some is a book, a piece of music, a face, a photograph, a landscape, a lover, a city, a house, a land, a ritual, a path, a way of being, even" (84). Okri's observations help to define, comparatively conceptualize the characterization mode, and identify the preoccupations and anxieties of Beyene Haile's protagonists in their search for identity. Like Okri's characters, each artist or intellectual in *Tebereh's Shop* must go through a journey—the arduous journey of self-discovery—before finding answers to larger post-independence societal problems and national issues.

Clearly conscious of their historical responsibility as the educated class of community leaders and opinion formers, yet haunted by past individual failures, a sense of a lack of accomplishment, and the doubly agonizing feeling of being "out of place" (first as exiles or the oppressed, and now as returnees or marginalized members of society), as well as the private woes and regrets resulting from wasted life, divorce, and political oppression, the characters intensely strive to find answers for themselves and for society. However, self-discovery proves extremely difficult. One character, Dr. Jaber, rightly says that it is the hardest journey with a seemingly endless end:

These are interesting times in a free country. To all of us, including those who stayed here, there are many things revealed to us or hidden from us as a result of the bitter struggle, or exile or colonization. You see? Freedom is a heavy burden. It creates pressure, heavy pressure. Whatever has been decided for you by others, individual or collective, it [freedom] tells you now to decide it by yourself. If you don't decide, you will know you have decided not to. There is no escaping from that. Time has also played its role. It has alienated our past, present and future lives from each other more; or condensed them together in a much tighter way that they are hardly perceptible, even made them fade into

each other losing their particularities. We are moving in circles, in uncertain times (21; trans. mine)

Or, as one of the other character-narrators tells it, for some of them it feels as if they have found themselves in Samuel Becket's famous play *Waiting for Godot*, where the actors, fixed in time and space, do not seem to know what or who they are waiting for, and who will "probably never know even after the awaited has arrived" (128–29).

Haile's book derives its Tigrinya title, *Deqwan Tebereh*, from the store that the characters frequent. Some of them visit the shop for business; others come casually as the owner befriends them, or simply because they like its shabby look and the disorderly fashion in which items are stored in the shop. According to the narrator, the shop has something for everyone. But it becomes clear that the shop has a strange aspect to it. Customers are not served in the habitual way, and instead have to search and find what they want for themselves, without any help from the owner. In the imagination of those who frequent it, Tebereh's shop stands as an instant metaphor for the New Eritrea. Without doubt, their imagination is partly fed by the collective postindependence euphoria, and even more so by their own eagerness to fill their "void" by having "faith" in a cause, and to participate in and help with the reconstruction of their newly emergent African nation. The shop further functions as a perfect metaphor when its unique philosophies of "advertising without advertising" (as the shop is chaotic and cluttered), and of "self-help" are seen to converge, first with the pre-independence war-torn picture, and later with the much popularized image of the "self-reliance" and "confidence" of the New Eritrea.

Though populated by a plethora of fascinating characters, the book does not have a central character. This role is rather fulfilled by a place-character, Tebereh's shop itself, which attracts the novel's characters and effectively functions as their haven. The characters have different backgrounds and view the philosophy of this unique shop with different eyes. Dr. Jaber, a university psychology professor, and his friend Tsegay—a writer who, having languished under the colonial regime (71), finds solace in a homely, superstitious, and affable lover (Regwad)—think highly of Tebereh's creativity and initiative. Habte, a video-cameraman and artist, returns from the Diaspora after many years of exile. The first time he enters the shop, he is hastily looking for batteries for his camera, and complains a great deal about nothing and everything, especially about the self-help policy of the shop (62–63), which he finds time-consuming and impractical.

Speedy and passionate in his approach to his work, Habte is reminiscent of Sam, the cameraman in Okri's *In Arcadia*. Very much immersed in documenting history here and now, he roams Asmara trying to capture everything, both still and moving, on camera. His past, which he tries to hide, continues to haunt him, leading to emotional conflicts. During one of his visits to the liberated areas of Eritrea during the independence struggle, he had fallen passionately in love with Samira, a pretty woman-warrior. When she saw him off to exile, she said to him, "Don't worry. I will keep you here with me, and you will take me with you" (55, 89, 91). Her words return to him again and again, but he is unable to make sense of them, resulting in his psychological torment. Other frequent visitors of "Deqwan Tebereh" include Guulay, Tirhas, Abdu, and Dr. Amina.

Guulay, a talented artist who struggles to give meaning to his life, comes to “Teberesh’s Shop” because he has fallen in love with Tirhas, a young ex-fighter who works in the store. Like Habte, he had spent a great part of his life in exile. Abdu is a researcher in economics who has lived the life of a “permanent student,” in California, taking only courses that interested him (65). He is interested in the store because it is fertile ground for his new research in sales and marketing strategies. At one point, we see him in a heated (yet pointless) argument with the fussy Dr. Amina, a New Yorker, about the merits of New York versus California. In addition to these human characters, there is also a unique object-character, a video camera. Permanently switched on by its owner, Habte, it ceaselessly documents every object, event, activity, and sound that comes near it.

Two other locations that serve as narrative spaces for the novel are Dandish Bar, located in downtown Asmara, and the legendary Eritrean military training camp of Sawa. Dandish Bar is the haunt of many former freedom-fighters and civilian returnees, who have returned after the war to (re)discover the ways of their new home-city. There is abundant drinking and noise, animated small talk, laughter, and chaos. Above all, however, the bar is home to essential and vigorous political discussions regarding the future course of the country. The patrons entertain all kinds of options—including extreme ones—in their pursuit of an ideal political structure for Eritrea. The bar’s popularity is due in large part to its elderly owner, Dandish, a bubbly Italianate figure and one of the novel’s liveliest characters. Unlike the ex-freedom-fighters, who are preoccupied with their future and that of their country, and the returnees, who have yet to define their role in the new nation, Dandish claims that he has no worries, because, as he says, his two children had returned home safely from the war, and “the one who was abroad had visited.” All the same, though business is booming, he seems bothered about the “new” people in his bar, “who do not exactly know what an *aperitivo* [in the Italian way] means” (27). In sharp contrast to the bar, Sawa, the military camp, stands as a chosen site of Eritrea’s newly invented and vital tool of national acculturation. It becomes the practical and symbolic space for purgation of national as well as individual ills. It is there that the emotionally injured and culturally displaced former exiles, through physical training and practical political education, try to learn to cope with the realities of their new environment. By interacting with the ordinary recruits and their trainers, they build up courage and self-confidence, and are seen, gradually but definitely, to shed their inbuilt inhibition and fear, and the feelings of guilt and shame amassed during colonial time and exilic life.

INTELLECTUALS AND REPRESENTATION

Having cured his characters of their internal fears and crises in this manner and in the context of the aforementioned venues, Haile consequently redirects his book into the realm of art, and examines/discusses the intellectual and artist characters as “interpreters” (in the Soyinkan sense) in relation to their responsibilities in society. And how does the author envision their role after such a transformation? The issue of the role of the intellectual is pertinent in any society. For this reason, there is extensive scholarship on the subject by numerous prominent scholars and writers, including Gramsci (1971), Chomsky (1987), Said (1994), Ngugi (1997), and

Dhar (1999). Particularly applicable to the material at hand is Edward Said's classification and discussion of intellectuals. In *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), Said, who (also) draws on the work of Benda, Gramsci, and Chomsky, among others, in his approach to the topic, posits two main types of intellectuals: "the anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat," and the "public intellectual" (Said 12–13). The label of "anonymous functionary" applies to professional persons, technocrats, and groups of experts who specialize in the details of specific areas, yet shut themselves off from engaging in larger societal or public issues. In contrast, the "public intellectual" is a true intellectual in the deeper, classical sense:

[T]he intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business . . . the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. (11)

Regarding the social alignment of such individuals, Said adds, "There is no question in my mind that the [true] intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented" (22). Said's model of the ideal-type of the public intellectual is clearly grounded in established Western notions (his examples include great European writers and thinkers, as well as figures who, after Foucault, could be identified as the "founders of discursivity" (Foucault 206)). However, Said's categorization also recognizes the local or regional differences that constitute the Third World intellectual:

To speak of intellectuals today is also to speak specifically of national, religious and even continental variations on the topic, each one of which seems to require separate consideration. The African intellectuals or Arab intellectuals, for instance, are each set in a very particular historical context, with its own problems, pathologies, triumphs, and peculiarities. (Said 26)

In the case of the regional and historical context of Haile's Eritrea, Said's "anonymous professionals" appear in the form of the "qelem-qemes" (pseudo-intellectuals and ill-learned members of the intelligentsia), by opposition to the "true artists and intellectuals." As Haile depicts them, the "qelem-qemes" are inept, self-centered, pompous, inconsequential, insensitive, and even mean creatures. Lacking in creativity, desire, and the capacity to seek the truth, this group is little more than a poor caricature of itself. The depiction of the "true intellectuals and artists" is by far more interesting and engaging. There are no neatly formulated statements about the group, and no normative discourse attempting to explain their responsibilities as artists. Instead, Haile's views about the nature and role of the intellectual or artist are given by exemplification—i.e., through role-modeling. Haile's prime protagonists make it clear that his ideal intellectuals are exceptional figures. They are unique in that they possess heightened traits of competence (knowledge) and performance (the capability to enact knowledge.)⁷ Additionally, despite their middle-class backgrounds, they are willing to work with the poor and underprivileged in order to bring about fundamental economic, social, and cultural change. In this sense, they are very different from, for example, the "qelem-qemes," who see and use their (mis)education as a mere status symbol. True

intellectuals also differ from the ex-freedom-fighters, who have gained authority and yet, despite their occasional positive or helpful gestures, seem too weary and intellectually worn-out to provide leadership or inspiration.

More important, however, for Haile, the mark of the “true intellectual” seems to lie as much in the degree to which an individual is able to bear the brunt of the personal and sociocultural trials and tribulations during the arduous journey to self-transformation as it does in the quality of the visions embodied, choices made, and routes taken during that same journey of self-emancipation and, subsequent, eventual resurgence as an African intellectual. In short, the true intellectuals of *Teberesh's Shop* are “heroic figures,” who, having endured and survived collective failure and personal tragedies provide a much-needed source of inspiration and direction in the movement to invert a stagnant and stagnating postcolonial situation. We thus see Abdu, who had been insipid and unsure of himself, reappear, reborn, as a gigantic intellectual figure. We see him living out the fundamentals of a strangely entitled philosophical book, *Stone Flower*, written by an anonymous Eritrean writer to raise the aggregated social and cultural awareness of his people. Abdu declares that all the stones and rocky mountains of Eritrea could be sculpted into newly emerging state and public buildings, factories, shrines, museums, and recreation and cultural centers (see also p. xi), which could be worshipped as functional and artistic artifacts. The dry landscape and stony valleys could likewise be altered into green and beautiful sites. The core of his principle is that everything is possible, given inventiveness, collective goodwill, and hard work. Similarly, Guulay is depicted as developing his own vision, which he calls the “Forum of Full Possibilities.” Siding with, as Said observed, ‘the weak and grassroots,’ and mobilizing and working hand-in-hand with his countrymen, Guulay labors to see his dream made real. Like Abdu’s, his philosophy is predicated on the same semantics about the necessity of creativity, hard work and devotion to one’s community. Toward the novel’s end, characters who act in staged dramatic plays and impromptu verbal games are seen exchanging diverse opinions about the future of their nation and society, and Eritrea (which, interestingly, again resembles the now-revamped “Teberesh’s Shop,” p. 381) is likened to the Sphinx, offering difficult riddles, or to the phoenix rising from the ashes, partly as a result of the imaginative power and dedicated hard work of its artists and intellectuals.

In the context of the new Eritrea that it describes, *Teberesh's Shop* serves a meaningful cultural purpose. Written from a vantage point that sees, acknowledges, and celebrates the power of intellectuals in their ability to transform a society, the novel gives its Eritrean readers not only a substitute “textual world” through which they can reflect upon their contemporary reality, but also one in light of which they may weigh their various options, and thus entertain new possibilities in the face of postcolonial developmental challenges. It provides a roadmap (albeit a fictional one) rich with innovative ideas for political and socioeconomic change, and a new-fashioned ethos of culture, art, and work. While these are themselves new “inventions,” Haile emphasizes their potential to promote new values, foster fresh perceptions, and to provide opportunities for the reevaluation of both current and possible realities. As a result, one can conclude that *Teberesh's Shop* is both a novel of the “present” and of the “future.”

However valid this reading, which claims that the novel is a positive, discursive intrusion on society’s consciousness, imagining and enabling a better future,

it is also incomplete unless we admit that there are other critical interpretations that have received the novel quite differently. Indeed, when it was published, a section of the Eritrean readership found themselves infuriated and alienated by its content; some of them have subsequently become ardent critics of the book. The key points of division between its (critical) admirers and (radical) detractors concern the novel's language and its representation of the "intellectual": whether it was fair and genuine, whether it helps or hurts the group, and even whether this was an urgent problem that needed to be addressed during a time of war.

THE CONTROVERSIES ON AND AROUND TEBEREH'S SHOP: THE CHARGES OF POLITICAL AMBIVALENCE AND LITERARY ELITISM

Notwithstanding the general appreciation and recognition of Beyene Haile's talented literary work and his contribution to Eritrean literature, there have also been, as mentioned previously, some negative critical reactions towards his work. These criticisms typically revolve around his supposed literary elitism and his political ambiguity. While I do not necessarily agree with all the points raised by Haile's detractors, and, at the same time, hesitate to "overpoliticize" the book for fear of that discussion superseding treatment of its other literary and cultural merits, these critics' concerns need to be represented and evaluated, for they have been heard repeatedly in Eritrean intellectual and literary circles since the novel's publication. Almost without exception, those who complain about the novelist's "elitism" refer to the complexity and inaccessibility of the text. The most disenchanted among them even declare that they "stopped half-way" because they cannot find either pleasure or instruction in the text. The difficulty that some readers face in reading certain texts is not a new phenomenon, and has been amply accounted for in literary scholarship by, for example, Wolfgang Iser, one of the chief exponents of the "reception-theory." Commenting particularly on reader-author interaction, Iser observes:

The work is more than the text, for the text only takes life when it is realized [i.e., read], and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader—though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. . . . A literary text is . . . something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination. . . . A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. (212–13)⁸

However, the reader's engagement with the text can also be disrupted if the text proves too simple or, on the other hand, too difficult. Overly easy texts lead to boredom; overly complex texts can cause overstrain or distraction. Both extreme experiences force readers to "leave the field of play" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 213). The disappointed readers of *Tebereh's Shop* seem to fall into Iser's category of "overstrained" readers, as, by their own admission, they are overwhelmed by the intricate design of the novelist's narrative and the genuinely erudite nature of his writing.⁹ Thus it is perfectly understandable that some readers terminate their

engagement with the novel prematurely. Understanding the problem in this way, however, does not necessarily mean that their disappointment arises out of the novel's flaws (as they seem to insinuate), but that their level of engagement with the novel simply did not connect with what it had to offer, preventing fruitful reading.¹⁰

Whereas concerns about the novel's literary elitism seem to a large extent to be the result of unsuccessful interaction between reader and text—and, pragmatically speaking, that is neither's fault—charges of political ambivalence raise serious issues. The main point of contention here is related to the “qelem-qemes.” The novel's critics express discontent with *Teberesh's Shop's* portrayal of these members of the Eritrean intelligentsia, arguing that—given the predominantly traditional and conformist culture of Eritrea, the EPLF's brutality against intellectuals during the armed struggle,¹¹ and the present government's hostility towards that group¹²—such a negative depiction on the part of one of the country's main writers at a critically unstable political moment¹³ may be (mis)used by the government as another stigmatizing tool to legitimate their anti-intellectualism. For some commentators, as the following excerpts show, this concern is very genuine indeed. A young student wrote with emotion: “The book is great, but not blameless. The so-named ‘qelem-qemes’ are portrayed as the characters who have done nothing good for their people and country; that is not true and fair. Haven't they made huge sacrifices during the armed struggle to bring independence to the country? But Beyene Haile thinks they are useless, just like the government and the party that say educated people are useless.” Another, more experienced commentator put his observations thus:

There is a myth created about this book. Still I am puzzled by [the author's] willingness to concentrate so much as he did on the negative side or weaknesses of the intelligentsia, a group which has suffered a great lot throughout Eritrean history. . . . Overall, I think the book merits a special place as a landmark of Tigrinya literature. But, again, the dismissive image it paints of us worries me, as it riskily comes close to the EPLF-government's deeply held anti-intellectual bias in general.¹⁴

So interpreted, these readers and critics of *Teberesh's Shop* have a valid point. However, even here, it is fair to counter-point in favor of the novel and the novelist by saying that the novel is a fictional narrative, and not an analytical document. The mandate of science is accuracy and predictability, while fiction's terms of reference are creativity and unpredictability. And just as it is wrong to confuse the distinct roles of scientific and fictional writing, it is erroneous to equate the novelist's attack on a particular category of the Eritrean intelligentsia with a general attack on all intellectuals. Moreover, given the restricted access to printing in the country, it should also be considered that Beyene Haile, without necessarily compromising values and principles, may have wanted to opt for a “minimum-threat” approach, that is, providing readers (including those in power) something that they (would) like to hear, rather than pursuing a more “conflict-oriented” approach.

This strategy of coping with institutional constraints and political adversity is nothing new, and has been practiced regularly by African writers, as the following remarks from Kwesi Yankah and André Lefevere illustrate, aptly. Yankah

says that “[p]rotest against political authority in several cultures of Africa often finds expression in disguised discourse that is structured to preserve social relationships and pose a minimum threat to one’s face-integrity. . . . [If] the avoidance of directness in protesting against authority [is] due to the repressive and vindictive tendencies of dominant authorities when they feel exposed by open critique, [then] the deployment of verbal indirection . . . becomes compelling” (Yankah 137). Lefevere, who characterizes African writing produced under constraining, “undifferentiated” environments as writings born out of the “zone of tension,” has described the conundrum such authors are faced with thus:

The concept of constraint(s), as used here, implies all statements made about [the work] are more or less double-edged, or rather, the reader/hearer is supposed to supply the other side of the coin, so to speak. Constraints can always be honoured and subverted. Their importance lies only partially in their existence, the other part being the spirit in which they are taken [by the reader]. Producers of literature may subvert these constraints, or they may be quite happy to work with them or within them.

[Such] Literature, then, is produced in the zone of tension where the artist’s creativity comes to terms with the constraints. The writer will not reject those constraints out of hand in systems with undifferentiated patronage, *because he quite simply has nowhere to go—but silence.* (466; emphasis added)

Yet, whatever one believes to be the “right” explanation, and regardless of how future critical studies will judge Beyene Haile’s craft, it is just as important to remember that the novelist is interested in this book in more than merely representing the responsibility of the artist or intellectual in society. In his concern for his native Eritrea and its people, the author is also intimately involved in documenting and understanding the bigger cultural, social, and ideological issues of the day, a preoccupation that has been practiced by virtually all great writers of Africa. And since what he observes is incorporated into his fiction with skill and complexity, one can say, without hesitation, that in Beyene Haile, Eritrea has finally found not only a world-class novelist, but a true chronicler and interpreter of its past and current culture and history. Moreover, if we are to look at Haile’s *Teberesh’s Shop* as an artistic production, apart from its historical and cultural significance, we can no longer deny the enormous contribution he has made to Eritrean literature, in the more immediate and specific sense. By expanding the thematic frontiers of his novel to include crucial ideological, political, social, artistic and intellectual issues, and by presenting his readers with inventive and challenging narrative techniques, he has elevated Eritrean creative fiction to higher standards, and has proved to be a robust force of criticism and awareness-raising—two facets that are hallmarks of all great writing.

Teberesh’s Shop closes by raising pressing questions, through one of the female characters. Actually, it is the very land of Eritrea that poses these questions in the novel, and it is the citizens who are required to answer. “How do you see?” it asks, “and what do you see?” The citizens respond silently yet knowingly through body movements, and humming poetic songs. They seem to say in chorus: “Like all those who first try to self-scrutinize themselves and then cure you through their artistic power, we see you through our hearts and minds, and our dream is to build you by injecting a new philosophy of life and art in man and society both.” I think

this kind of critical voice is vital to Eritrean society today, especially because, as I have tried to articulate in this paper, it comes from the mind of one of the nation's most talented writers at a critical point of crisis and transition. It has often been thought that writers need crises and adversity to come into their own no less than political and social transformation need talented and critical writers to give voice and direction. With this fascinating novel, Beyene Haile seems to affirm this belief.

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NOTES

1. There were about two dozen short written papers from students of the University of Asmara and senior readers (journalists and writers) who participated in the workshops known as "Cinema Odeon Literary Seminars," held in Cinema Odeon, Asmara, which ran for six months on a weekly basis, between November 2004 and May 2005. For a short report on the curriculum and participation of the seminar see also <http://www.shaebia.org>.

2. See Hillary Rodham Clinton's sympathetic account in *Living History* (2003) of her visit to Eritrea.

3. This policy was developed during the era of the guerrilla war for independence, out of necessity, to make up for the lack of external support and international disinterest to Eritrea's cause. On this, Kaplan, in *Surrender or Starve* writes: "[T]hey fought and won a three-decade struggle against a state ten times as populous, with no help from either of the superpowers or the rest of the outside world" (203).

4. See Connell, *Against All Odds*.

5. See, among others, the websites *asmarino.com*, and *awate.com*; 2006 Amnesty International report on human rights in Eritrea.

6. In my earlier writing, I have translated the title of this novel as "Would You Say He Has Gone Crazy?" but I think now that the new rendering—"Madness"—captures more the essence of the novel.

7. As is evident from the entire novel, these are the fundamental traits that the novelist wishes to see preserved in his "true intellectual" characters, however they may differ in other respects.

8. See also relevant sections in chapters 2 and 3, in Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

9. In the reader responses, remarks such as "I stopped mid-way," "too difficult to proceed," "extremely interesting but also a real challenge to read," etc., occur with high frequency.

10. Some explanation is required here for my use of "readers response theory." An anonymous reader of an earlier version of this essay has commented that rather than illuminating the contending receptions of the novel, it would be more effective to, for example, offer a "hermeneutic" exegesis regarding the relationship of 'a work of art/aesthetics and nation to frame the rejection' of Haile's novel by some readers. As is clear from my analysis elsewhere in the essay, the importance of an in-depth, careful reading of the structure and decoding the language of the novel cannot be doubted. However, a mere focus on the literary language of a text as construed by the critic

while silencing expressed concerns of “common” readers, or “cutting [the text] off from the more plainly urgent ones of everyday life worldly” interpretations (Ghosh 62) is limiting. While keeping the “tension” of an interpretation that rests on the idea of a structural “self-sufficiency of a text,” but also concerned with what Edward Said called the “worldliness” of the text, the “readers response theory,” as I use it here, generates a “conscious and productive” analysis. For me, this method of reading and analyzing that merges the critic’s “private process of reading” and the “contextualized and socialized” responses of readers is specially pertinent in understanding the complexity of the space and time in which Haile’s novel is read in the Eritrean literary arena today. (For elaboration of terms and notions cited in this note, see Ghosh 62–63 and Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.)

11. This is very clear to me from the series of interviews I conducted with a prominent, former EPLF figure in Asmara, in 2005. I hope to be able to publish the manuscript, after finishing the transcription and translation, in the near future. For published sources on the EPLF’s attitude to and treatment of its intelligentsia during the armed struggle, see Michela Wrong, who, citing first-hand accounts, observes: “Even those who today pine for a lost golden age acknowledge that individualism was not a quality valued by the EPLF. This was a military organization, after all, and true democracy, with its tolerance of mavericks and loudmouths, is not suited to waging war. At daily meetings, Fighters would publicly pick over each other’s revolutionary failings, ‘self-criticism’ was strongly encouraged. ‘There were spies in the Movement who would befriend you, listen to your ideas, pretend to sympathize with your complaints and then, during a meeting, denounce you as “petit-bourgeois” or accuse you of being a “regionalist,” remembers an ex-Fighter. ‘People who had taken degrees were made to apologize to the peasantry for their education and privileges.’ . . . But there were some who couldn’t stand it, and they deliberately martyred themselves in battle” (307). See also Wong’s account about the killing of the *manqa* group in the 1970s (385–86). These were “some fighters who objected to Isaias’ style of leadership [and] formed a movement dubbed *manqa* (‘bat’) after its habit of meeting at night” (385).

12. Expressed, for example, in the government’s arbitrary “dismissal of respected teachers and researchers Alex Naty and Abdulkader Saleh from their positions at the University of Asmara” (Dorman 207), and the subsequent destabilishment of the university, the only institution of higher learning in the country. For a fuller and nuanced account of the government’s policy on research, see Dorman.

13. For a detailed account on the continually deteriorating political and human rights situation in Eritrea, see, for example, Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners*; see also Wrong.

14. From “reader-response” research papers (Asmara, 2005).

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