

**Literature and Politics in the Horn: An Overview<sup>1</sup>**  
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Say to the malicious and ignoble wasp;  
If thou do not give honey, do not sting.  
Saadi's words quoted in Von Beurmann,  
Vocabulary of the Tigre Language.

We ain't gonna die out, people is goin' on—  
changing a little, maybe, but goin' right on.  
John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath

In the Horn, as in many other places on this earth, power – especially power out of the muzzle of a gun – has become a trampoline for amassing wealth. Rulers wallow in luxury while the masses die out of inanition. The rapacity of the state and commercial classes is punctuated by a corresponding hemorrhage of their nation's wealth. The gravity of the situation is best expressed in Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin's poem, "Ours":

On your head  
Wind blew  
In your chest  
Life fluttered  
In your belly  
Progress rotted  
Under your feet  
Peasants and pastoralists died.

Gabre-Medhin's poem indicates the role of the artist in society. The artist has to have a perspicacity of observation. Such an observation must be able to reveal the internal contradictions which exist in society. It is the artist's responsibility, some contend, to creatively analyze the socio-political and economic reality which encumbers progress. A sober analysis of social reality will perhaps be able to de-anesthetize a great number of the living dead. Thus, "the call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusion" (Marx, 1964:44).

The abandonment of "a condition which requires illusion" takes us to a higher level of understanding and differentiation between appearance and reality. In Gabre-Medhin's poem, the audience is told of the condition of the malignant tumor which was spread through the whole body-politic of the state. The monster, as Djibouti poet William Siyad writes in Khamsine:

Gnaws everything in its  
path  
The belly and brains  
As leprosy the skin  
It comes right out  
From hell  
And takes the return trip  
Along its prey

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<sup>1</sup> This short article appeared in Association of Concerned Africa Scholars News Bulletin, 27 (Spring 1989): 32-36.

But not all who live in the belly of the monster lead an existential life. Sahle Sellassie, in his Shinega's Village, "the first Ethiopian novel in English," has the eponymous protagonist ask his father a not-so-amusing question about the "dedjatch."

Can this man be with child?  
Bala laughed silently but whispered back,  
"Don't say such things about a dedjatch."  
Shinega persisted. "Then what makes him so fat?"  
A little afraid that they were overheard, Bala said:  
"The dedjatch does not have to sweat the way we do.  
He doesn't have to jerk a plow or swing a sickle.  
He never has to walk far. That's why he is fat.  
Now don't ask anymore questions. Just listen,  
like a boy should." (p.67)

The dedjatch is adept at manipulating the peasants' emotions. He pretends that he works for their interests, that he is calling off a deal to sell the feudal manor. The peasants are not that naive as to fall for his chicanery, but as Paulo Freire states in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, they are resigned to fatalism not that such a characteristic is part of human nature, but because they have been conditioned to act and behave so by an historical and sociological necessity. In the Phenomenology of Mind, Hegel states that the meeting of two individuals entails a confrontation of two self-consciousness. As is true of all combat situations, each individual resorts to all methods at his/her disposal to cancel the other dialectically. The dialectical elimination of a consciousness is complete when one person cringes before the other. The defeated self-consciousness assumes the role of the "bondsmen," while the victorious one assumes that of the lord (pp. 228-40). To effectively control the peasants, their self-esteem had to be crushed by those in power.

The precepts of a new form of education become essential. It is through education that the effects of such a historical catalepsy could be reversed. As Hugo Blanco writes in Land or Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru, the peasants have been enslaved partly because the oppressors had "made them regard paper as a god" (p. 84). It becomes important, therefore, to strive for an expropriation of language by the peasant. It is towards this end that Menghistu Lemma's "Marriage of Unequals" contributes its share. The defetishizing of power is achieved in the play through a travesty of aristocratic concepts and words. All forms of appellation are laden with some sort of symbolism. The protagonist, Bahru, named after the ocean, is generous. He is the foreign-educated nephew of a local Lady, whose name, Alganesh Dubida, means "the bed that befalls on the unsuspecting." Lady Dubida is a snob who does not know what to make of her nephew's iconoclasm. In the passage that follows, Alaka, the head of the village church, describes to her Ladyship the magnanimity of Bahru's endeavor to construct a school:

He was simply amazing... How shall I describe him? If anyone  
there is who saw Adam in the morning of his creation while still on  
the clay stage, just before the Almighty blew the breath of life into  
his nostrils - Well, Master Bahru looked exactly like that. Hadji  
and I had a good laugh contemplating him. (p. 28)

Her Ladyship is not amused. She could see with dismay that her plans for him, and by extension Ethiopia, have fizzled out.

To drive his message home, the playwright gives the name Bogale to the twelve year old adopted son of Bahru. The name means “the brightened one.” But attendant to such a name is a whole set of meanings, salient among which is the sudden brightening of a light. The “suddenness” associated with the name is best imaged by observing the explosion of a bomb at a close range where, even though light travels faster than sound, it is difficult to differentiate which comes first – the light or the sound of the explosion. The analogy is best understood in the play's context when one thinks of one socio-economic formation giving way to another. In short, the playwright is hinting at a simmering cataclysm - simmering, because Bahru is no Paladin.

The message of the play has a far-reaching impact on the villagers. First, Bahru's school can hopefully be a symbol for the expropriation of the concept of learning by the peasant. Secondly, the need to dismantle the aristocracy is predicated upon an amalgamation of the forces of the intellectual and the ordinary people.

In the Somali Republic, Nuruddin Farah's œuvre cover both the internal dynamics of Somali society and the tenuous situation which makes all nationalities in the Horn “fellow travelers.” In his trilogy which chronicles the lives of ten elites and their associates, Farah shows how Somalia's destiny is given to the hounds by clowns and sycophants who form a Parvenu class riddled with avarice. The “alma mater” on whose might the degenerates depend for guidance is none other than the General himself. In all three books, the protagonists either die or are neutralized for life. Farah's trilogy could perhaps be criticized, not so much for their depiction of life under the General, but for their lack of vision. The books share a disease with those of Sartre, Malraux, Camus, etc. - a disease Roger Garaudy has diagnosed as “the literature of the graveyard.”

In Maps, Farah takes up a topic that reveals all the woes, contradictions, fears, myths, and grim realities which make the Horn of Africa what it is today. The protagonist, Askar, is a young boy from the Ogaden. His mother dies in childbirth, while his father has lost his life in the 1977 Somali-Ethiopian War. Yet Askar is nurtured and cared for by Misra, product of a “damoz” union between an Amhara father and an Oromo concubine. Farah is perhaps alluding to the futility of the internecine wars among nationalities whose lives intertwine in more ways than one. In the absence of just and long-lasting solutions to the problems which beset these nationalities, pseudo-solutions concocted by charlatans will appeal to many. The pendulum of disaster will hardly come to a stop until it is realized that, in the words of one male character in Maps, “Waves of atmospheric spirits fill the air of anyplace where the dead aren't buried” (p. 122). It is perhaps incumbent upon writers of fiction to put their creativity in the service of people. They should not, however, gloss over the weaknesses of the communities whose experiences they translate in their works. Fiction writers in the Horn of Africa are not different, and history will judge them accordingly.

## **NEWS & RESOURCES**

### U.S. Declares ANC “Terrorists”

The April 26, 1989, issue of the U.S. Guardian reported that the U.S. State Department had reversed its policy on the ANC and now had labeled it as a terrorist organization. After several phone calls to the State Department, Professor David Wiley of Michigan State University determined that the State Department policy was precipitated by a Pentagon report from January 1989 which included the ANC as a “terrorist organization.” On further query, a State Department spokesperson indicated to Wiley that no acts of UNITA were included in the report since UNITA is “an insurgent movement.” Single copies of the report are available from the Bureau of Counter Terrorism at 202-647-8933.

#### Cohen Urges U.S. Companies to Stay in South Africa

Herman J. Cohen, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 2, 1989, that the U.S. Government should encourage American companies to stay in South Africa so they could set an example of socially responsible behavior for South African businesses. Cohen indicated that he was "very distressed" to learn that Mobil Corporation had decided to sell its South African operations. Mobil is the largest U.S. company remaining in South Africa.

#### South African General Election Set for Sept. 6

President P.W. Botha has called a general election for September 6, 1989. The black majority of South Africa will not be permitted to vote in the election. The election will be the first in which white, mixed-race and Indian voters cast ballots on the same day for three segregated chambers of Parliament. The 73-year-old Botha, who suffered a stroke in January, will retire after the elections. The new President is expected to be Education Minister F.W. de Klerk, age 53.

#### Minorco Ends Bid to Control Gold Fields

Minorco, an investment arm of Anglo American Corporation of South Africa and the world's largest gold mining company, ended its attempt to take over Consolidated Gold Fields, the second largest gold producer. The offer was terminated in May 16, 1989, following of a U.S. court.