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**Review**

TADDESSE ADERA – ALI JIMALE AHMED (eds.), *Silence is not Golden. A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*

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## Reviews

this wide array of authors. The reader should also be warned that the English, though always comprehensible, is at times idiosyncratic and entries are at times repetitive.

Finally, let me emphasize how much I enjoyed reading *Black Lions* and how fascinating members of the local Ethiopian community in Tallahassee have found the book. The Red Sea Press has performed a most important service to the English speaking Ethiopian diaspora in printing this and other works. REIDULF MOLVAER in *Black Lions* gives a truly unique view of modern Ethiopian literary figures unavailable elsewhere in English.

Peter Garretson

TADDESSE ADERA and ALIJIMALE AHMED (*eds.*), *Silence is not Golden. A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*. Lawrenceville, NJ.: The Red Sea Press, Inc. 1995. 214 pp. US\$ 16.95 (paperback).

This book is a welcome introduction to the field of Ethiopian literature, relatively unknown and little-studied abroad. In fact, it is one of the very few of its kind, and unfortunately it shows the weaknesses of such a pioneering effort. It seems to be a rather hastily gathered and hardly edited collection of very diverse pieces which creates some confusion in the mind of a reader not well-versed in the various genres of Ethiopian literature (dating back many centuries) and modern fiction writing (dating from 1908). Indeed, there is little unity of format or purpose. Though the introduction to the book is helpful up to a point, it does not offer a good and balanced overview of the field and gets lost sometimes in erudite but excessive references. The book is a somewhat curious sample of studies or comments related to Ethiopian creative literature, without an attempt at critical evaluation of trends and developments. There is neither any editor's afterword to do this.

The title of this book is also puzzling: the first part is not explained anywhere, though it presumably means that to speak out and express oneself is an art as well as a necessity in Ethiopia, and the sub-title is not correct: the book is not an anthology of but **on** Ethiopian literature: when we expect a collection of some good creative fiction from Ethiopia we are disappointed. Nevertheless, a series of critical studies on Ethiopian literary works is also very useful and indeed necessary, given the fact that Ethiopian creative writing and

literature is well-developed and has deep and fascinating historical roots. This large corpus is not well-known outside the country, partly because it presumes knowledge of the Ethiopian languages in which the literature was written: mainly Amharic, followed by Tigrinya and Oromo (even apart from Ge'ez for the pre-19th century work). It is ironic – and perhaps unfair – that Ethiopia has remained on the back stage of African literature partly because of its *not* having adopted a colonial language for its creative writing.

The book has 11 chapters and an introduction by one of the editors. Four chapters – not three (see p. vii) – have been previously published elsewhere (TADDESSE ADERA's chapter "From apologist to critic: the dilemma of Bealu Girma" on pp. 155–166 was in *Northeast African Studies* (N.S.), 1995, 2(1): 135–144).

Space does not allow in-depth comments on the chapters, but they are of various kinds: discussions of four novels; a brief analysis of the two English – language plays of the renowned author TSEGAYE GÄBRE MEDHIN by BIODUN JEYIFO (the only non-Ethiopian author here); a sensitive and personal essay on poetry by the great poet SOLOMON DERESSA; a long chapter by linguist ABRAHAM DEMOZ on languages and language policy (which, however, does not have much to do with literature, and has curious mistakes, e.g. stating that the Cushitic language-family is not represented outside Ethiopia); a book review by HAILU FULASS of the book on Amharic fiction by R. K. MOLVAER of 1980; a good historical survey by GETATCHEW HAILE of ancient Ethiopian literature in Ge'ez (religious works, royal chronicles and poetry) and its wider context; and a study by TADDESSE ADERA of the tragic fate of BEALU GIRMA, author of the famous and widely read novel *Oromai* (1983).

Throughout the 20th century, Ethiopian literature has been closely connected with ideological issues and social-political ideals related to the challenges of building a modern society. This started under emperor Minilik II, when AFÄWÄRQ GÄBRE-YÄSUS wrote *Libb Wälläd Tarik* (later known as *T'obbiya*), the first and very influential modern novel in Amharic, published in 1908. ALI JIMALE AHMED, in his introduction, rightly calls the book a "foundational text". The book, set in an unspecified pre-modern period, is still read today, as a romance and a story about virtue, family values and the power of love, and its appeal may be partly explained by its original style and dramatic construction. It is more readable than later novels by pioneers of Amharic fiction like HIRUY WÄLDE-SELLASIE, which suffer from too much belabouring moral points. *T'obbiya* is discussed in two (very different) chapters by TAYE ASSEFA and YONAS ADMASSU. The first is a long narrative analysis (pp. 61–91) and tries to analyse form, structure and content as well as to present the social and cultural

context of the novel. The chapter by YONAS emphasises, against some earlier commentators, that *T'obbiya* is not all fable or modern fairy tale but has many elements of realism, and that its thematic concern is with virtuous love in a generalised sense.

The momentous novel by HADDIS ALÄMAYYEHU, *Fiqir iskä Mäqabir* (1972), is analysed by FIKRE TOLOSSA. In this work, the social ills of Haile Sellassie's Ethiopia are powerfully and in some way prophetically dramatised. But the book is not important chiefly for this reason, but for its literary power: its rich style, its evocation of character, its underlying mood of melancholy. These aesthetic criteria should of course ultimately be decisive in judging a book as an important literary event of enduring value, and not its extent of realism, its alleged correct depiction or analysis of historical events, or its role in striving for social justice, etc.: these are lofty ideals but not the first task of literature. Although *Fiqir iskä Mäqabir* may not have the same distance towards events and political conditions as, e.g., *Il Gattopardo* (a novel of 1958 by G. DI LAMPEDUSA set in the old Italian feudal society) had, it can perhaps be seen as its Ethiopian pendant, describing the waning of an old order and the deep insecurity about the new one to come.

Socio-political criticism is much more explicit in the novel *Alwelledim* by ABBIE GUBEGNA (published in the late 1960s), discussed by GHIRMAI NEGASH, who promises on the first page to treat the novel in the light of Mieke Bal's theory of narratology but subsequently goes on to evaluate to what extent the novel corresponds to or has correctly depicted actual political developments.

This sort of effort is repeated in TADDESSE's discussion of the novel *Firebrands* (1979), written in English by B.M. SAHLE SELLASSIE. TADDESSE even starts arguing with the author for not having reliably described certain political developments that actually took place and even intends to improve on the author's character description. Although this effort yields some interesting points, basically it is of course a fruitless exercise, because a literary author's aim is not and should not be to describe social or political conditions 'as they really were'. Neither is it to give political prescriptions for the future – this is also a far cry from the first task of a literary critic, i.e., to comment in a comparative vein on the literary value of a work of fiction as a creative work of art with a possible wider meaning. Of this, however, there is little in the articles of the two critics; also of plot, character description, narrative structure, dramatic effect, style, etc. We really do not need an evaluative rehearsal of the socio-economic conditions and the problems of Ethiopia in a novel. As OSCAR WILDE said long ago in his essay *The Decay of Lying* (1889), the more an author tries to be 'realist' the less interesting or persuasive s/he becomes as an

artist. It is imagination that counts, not a 'correct description' of social or political problems.

The fact that such 'realist' elements appear very frequently in the novels as well as in the work of critics may indeed attest to the legitimate and deeply felt concerns of Ethiopian authors, intellectuals, and the reading public about the problems of Ethiopian society. Against this specific background, common human problems as treated in works of fiction, such as the nature of love, friendship, life's eternal dilemmas, or questions of meaning come out even starker. But that background cannot be the main concern of fiction.

There are no comments in the book on Ethiopian literature after 1991, when a historic change of regime occurred. While it is indeed too brief a period to be dealt with in this book published in 1995, many questions arise as to the state of literature in Ethiopia now. The emergence of a more free private press in Addis Ababa after 1991 (though not without its problems) suggests that much more is possible in terms of writing and publishing in other – e.g. literary fields – as well, but few novels and other literary works have come out to catch the limelight. It must be recalled that in the *Derg* period many authors – despite censorship – were encouraged to write, and literary work was frequently read on national radio. The Ethiopian book-publishing scene today is still much dominated by the publication of translations of second-rate foreign 'best-sellers'. It is not known whether this is because of market demand or of policy in the (semi-state) publishing houses, but this trend may endanger the further growth of the Ethiopian literary tradition.

Jon G. Abbink

UOLDELUL CHELATI DIRAR, ALESSANDRO GORI, IRMA TADDIA, *Lettere tigrine. I documenti etiopici del Fondo Ellero*. Vol I. Torino: Editrice L'Harmattan Italia, 1997. 207 pp. Price: LIT 29.000.

The idea of letting "Ethiopians Speak", the title of Leslau's pioneering series of linguistic monographs, found impressive expression in Sven Rubenson's ongoing series *Acta Aethiopica*, which features *inter alia* the politically most important diplomatic letters of the Ethiopian state. Subject-wise *Lettere tigrine* may in comparison seem no more than "small beer". The work under review, which comprises notes on 287 letters in the Ellero archives of the University of Bologna, is nevertheless of major interest for the history of northern Ethiopia,