

## Views from the *Tower*

“But the hills that we climbed  
were just seasons out of time.”

Seasons in the Sun

There is much of a clamor on Hiwot’s recent book *Tower in the Sky*. The tumult came as much from ex-members as opponents of the party. Needless to write, the book is worth reading, not because of the personal history in it but for the crafty integration of personal account with political history. Crafty because many of the current books coming out to the market writhes from inaccurate account. In this respect, it is quite skillful of the author to present us her own understanding of events spicing it with romantic personal flavor. Having said this, any judgment of historical incidents in the book should not be based merely on the author’s personal construal of events. The historical processes described in the book are not personal but public, not subjective but objective, therefore, subject to validation. The author’s version could be one among the many voices.

It is not only *Tower in the Sky*, but there are many books of the same genre that came out in the past few years. Recently, however, the frequency is showing a sudden spurt in size and theme. Some of these books are biographical in nature (*Assimba Fiqir*, *Tower in the Sky*, *Wore Negari*, ..etc), or fictional (*Yewsdal Menged-Yametal Menged*, *Merkogna*). Surprisingly, why so many books now and not earlier is amazing if not surprising. The flood of books in the market has indebted many individuals of that generation to comment and correct fallacies subtly presented in the books. This is rightly so for all we the living, ‘leftovers’ of that generation, is the bastion of the collective spirit of what the author calls the *Golden generation*. Recently, however, the sheer number of books coming out has dwarfed this effort of correcting misjudgments. As a result, books with visible historical canards are making their way to the collective consciousness of young readers as “ truth and nothing but the truth”. Nevertheless, these are many voices of the history that made up the *Generation*.

Despite genre differences, all the books invariably narrate the history of *the generation*. *The generation* was unique in many ways and deserves its history to be written. Much so because the events of the late 70's seems middle ages away to many young readers of today. The *Golden generation* serves as a datebook, *Ye Ihapa Gize*. As much *Ye Tilayan Gize* is to my generation, so is *Ye hiapa Gize* for the present young generation. Therefore, there is a need to anecdote the *Acts of the Generation*. In this respect, *Tower in the Sky* towers over other books of the same genre and is quite a book to read. *Tower in the Sky* has become a *succès fou* with pretty good sales and is now in its 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Thanks to the book, the author appeared from nowhere and became a celebrity in Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

The writing style flows in a seamless pattern between paragraphs. The author's Amharic is English (little she read in her own language as she claims in her book), and there is little poppycock in writing style. The author is indeed a skilled writer and has succeeded in encapsulating the unflinching commitment of young girls in the trying times of revolutionary days. The protagonist girl gives us a rear view image of what life looked like during Mengistu's time. Through that girl, we see the many fallen heroines of the generation who took their comrades secret to the graves. I felt proud when I read the book for the author represents the embodiment of that *golden generation* collective intelligence. She was an old girl from a school of thought that upheld excellence in all it did. She was an alumna of the youth league with its unified characters of ideals. The story crafted most of the league heroes and heroines. When it comes to narration the book is a nuanced page-turner, and I have not read a book (next to *Merkogna* from a different genre) written in a very flawless manner. *Tower in the Sky* is a *tour de force* in its writing skill, story crafting, and characterization. The author absolutely dominates the characters in the book running the show and constructing it how the narration goes. She gives little space for the reader to reflect through her riveting exploration of events and characters.

After the book came out reviewers have put their thoughts on the book; unfortunately, there is a growing bad habit of reviewers to cheer the métier of the books they reviewed. Gone are the days of "critical reviews". The "critics" nowadays focus more on the form

than on content with very little “appraisals”. In so doing, they lose the art of picking holes. Consequently all the reviews on the book that I read did not put their reservations on the historical gaffes. Historical solecism comes when the writer passes her/his personal judgment and pushes it to be part of the history of *that generation*. Such was the case of the poignant death of Getachew Maru, her boyfriend, who was executed by the Party squad. From my readings, I have the impression that his killing has neither been denied by party history writers nor by living witnesses. All agree one of the squad members killed him. The row rather is on “what events lead to his death” secrecy. Who triggered the chain of events so to write? Kiflu on "The Generation" says it was when Getachew tried to grab the pistol of the guard and made a run to it that led to his death (Kiflu, 1993). The author iterates the same narration as follows,

“Thirteen houses were raid last night. One of them was the house comrade (i.e. Getachew) has in. When the comrades heard the soldiers knocking at the gate, Getachew told the squad leader they should escape. The squad leader refused.... Getachew hit the comrade’s arm with karate, and when the pistol fell on the floor, he jumped out of the window. The squad leader picked up the pistol and followed him shot him dead” (Hiwot, 2012, p. 268).

The author then offers a counter argument, but a very fragile one as such,

““Squad member...and his colleagues gave a statement during interrogation saying that Getachew was shot dead. They beat him to death with club.... We beat a comrade like Getachew Maru to death. We did not even have respect to a founding member such as him” (Hiwot, 2012, p. 275).

By squad leader she was referring to Surafe Kaba.

So her rickety argument is that Getachew was killed before he made any attempt. Both Kiflu and the author agree that Getachew was a trained *karateka*, albeit an amateur. Snatching a gun from an unwary guard, therefore, was not only a possibility but a probability too. All circumstantial evidences suggest that the killing was not a premeditated act and substantiate Kiflu’s narration. In fact, if the killing were intentional,

Getachew could be executed immediately, and there would be no need to “quarantine” him. After all, there is a bylaw within the party, duly approved by Getachew, on defectors seriously endangering the life of party members. It was the death penalty. If such were the statute, there would be no point arguing why he was killed. Simply, he was found guilty and sentenced to death case closed. Nevertheless, no measure was taken up except to “quarantine” him. This had a cost too. Squad members put themselves in danger by trying to move Getachew from one detention house to another. Compounding the problem, this was at the time of the *Dergue’s* notorious mop up operations. “Thirteen houses were raided last night. One of them was the house comrade (i.e. Getachew) has in” (Hiwot, 2012, p. 275). One has to contextualize his death for so many things happened in so little time; one may even call *Ye Ihapa Gize* a time of *binge politics* specially at the climacteric phase. The author of the book has not done her homework, or her adoration for Getachew has blinded her judgments. To explain why this happened, one has to slice and dice, and employ contingent substantiations to reconstruct the episode. The party leadership of the time (what the duo labels the “Clique”) was edgy that if they let Getachew out he would spill the beans (Spill he did, (Berhane-Meskel, 1979). Why? Simply because, Getachew’s brother was a *Dergue* member. Once out Getachew knew who was who in the Party and where the safe houses were located. Would it have been a rational decision not to quarantine him? The author assures us that since his brother was away at the time no harm would have come out of it. This is as the saying goes “close your eyes and let me fool you” children’s play, therefore, does not hold water. Why was Getachew so clamorous in making a “common Front’ with the *Dergue*? Why was he adamantly stuck to his cranky theory that the regime was not “Fascism” but “State Capitalism”? Why did he frequently try to “humanize” and ‘Revolutionize’ the junta? Why was he demanding to make contact with Mengistu? Who tipped the Junta to raid the “Thirteen houses ..... One of them was the house comrade (i.e. Getachew) has in” (Hiwot, 2012). How could that be possible without a mole? There were many issues raised by Getachew that made him a prime suspect and a master schemer, hence the need to confine him. The first cut is the deepest in romance, but then sublimating it to politics is neurotic to write the least, ill-advisedly, Hiwot did that. When the author trespasses the fact line and tries to make her skewed assertions go as history, many of us would say,

“stop it, Hiwot”. Writing demands honesty and if the author is sincere, she could have followed a different trail and pose the question. Why was Getachew under a cloud? Why was he quarantined and not Birhane Meskel? Was not Birhane Meskel one of a kind that cut a big figure for himself in the Ethiopian student body politic than Getachew?

At any rate what happened weeks later validated his incarceration. As expected, the fracture of the Party structure did not come from the *Dergue*, but from the *Duo* forces known as the *Anja*. Who “burnt” the party organizational structure and names? Who were the chief inquisitors in the prison halls and *Kebele* detention centers? Who were the informers, betrayers and Judas to their comrades? Who submitted the *Codebook* and *modes operandi* to the junta, and made dysfunctional the exfiltration operations? Who looted the Party properties? I want the author to answer these questions and stop babbling on “Never should a red terror be repeated in the country” mantra. Who were the prime culprits in the killing rampage infamously known as “the red terror”? Who ran amok with the *Kebele Revolutionary Guards* in the killing spree? Were not they the *members of the Rectification movement*? The author has not dared to write on these issues, and she cannot without compromising her fidelity to her Romeo. Surprisingly, how can one write about Jesus without mentioning his closest disciples? For the life of me, I just could not figure it out.

Her reductionist approach to the history of *that generation* is pitiable. Getachew Maru in her book towers head and shoulder above his comrades as if he were “an only child” the student movement gave birth. His “big” stature dwarfs, Dr. Tesfaye Debsay, Yohannes Brihane, Alemayehu’s boys, Birhanu Ejigu, Zeru Khishin, the two Kiflu Taddesse, Hiruy’s boys and many others. The many heroes and heroines recede to the background as the author intentionally cast Getachew to the center. Getachew might be tall in his Abyot Group, but how big and tall was he after the merger. Taking into account his pre-merge organizing skill the central committee seemed to have given him multiple roles (Berhane-Meskel, 1979). Getachew was the link to the youth league if so why was there a need on the part of Getachew to make an informal structure (what the duo Christianize as *Rectification movement*) within the party. This is so after the merging was done and

completed, and was in secrecy without the knowledge of the CC. How come the “sleepers”, *the Rectification Group*, (including armed squads!!), proactively responded to Birhane Meskel *bugle call* within a short time? Were they waiting for the opportune time or what? How could that be possible without a structural setup, a master schemer and a priori deliberation? The author should have answered these questions to turn her story into the history of the *Golden Generation*. Otherwise, her story would always remain deficient and linger as an *Epistle of the Faction*.

## How tall was Getachew Maru

Getachew Maru was the youngest in the party central committee and probably that was why he was made the party’s liaison officer (albeit the weakest link in the structural chain) to the youth league. This in a sense had positioned Getachew to set up his informal structure among the Addis Ababa zone 1 committee (Berhane-Meskel, 1979). Here is my speculation. The problem of Getachew was as much personal as it was tactical. Vaedictorian and his shyness aside, he might probably felt he did not measure up with the new group who were more mature and educated. The problem was with the group mix, and that was not his making, and he cannot help it. This was so because the Party was made of two groups. An older group represented by Birhane Meskel and the younger group represented by Getachew Maru. Surprisingly, leaders of the two groups were the first casualties of the purge. The answer to “why” these two would lead us back to look for answers in the individuals’ character. It would help us to get a glimpse to the motive of Getachew to go back to the warm “womb” of his own “*Rectification Group*”. Getachew had found himself a loner in the big group with veteran revolutionaries, and this had somehow deprived him the status he had enjoyed in *Abyot*. This is quite human though not a character expected of the time. Getachew seemed an odd mix of a revolutionary trapped by age and early fame. Hence for Getachew to suffer from an inferiority complex is quite conceivable. What was not expected was his attempt to claim his new group as a therapeutic setting. This was true for Birhane Meskel too with his excessive egotism and power greed to be the General Secretary of the Party. The fall of

the giants came from a *maladie*. *Ha* suffered from egoism and *Le* from egotism. The same complex and energy led one to inferiority the other to superiority, but both suffered from some form of complex. Birhane Meskel futile attempt succumbing to the feet of the butcher is a case in point of a typical person suffering from a complex (Berhane-Meskel, 1979) and compare it with Tito's Statement (Tito, 1979). His attempt to go higher brought him down to the level of dabbing the dictator's shoe with his tears. His later manifested behaviors were latent from the beginning (Berhane-Meskel, 1979). Otherwise, why would he be interested in linking with Birhanu Zerihun of *Yezaerietu Ethiopia*? Why did he insist on working with *Dergue* and why he failed to call the *Dergue* and *Meison* by their names? What about giving the duo the benefits of the doubt; would co-opt with Mengistu, and calling his regime "State Capitalism" could change subsequent events? In retrospect, history absolves the decision of the central committee, for we all now know what happened to *Meison* who decided to work with Mengistu. The outcaste (As' *Simba*' the lion) met his diminutive equal, the bandit Mengeste Defer, who made Birhane Meskel a captive in Outlands (Berhane-Meskel, 1979). The old lion became a victim to the mockery of flies!! What a sad story!!

This later behavior of the *duo* by no means reduces the contribution of the giants to the student movement. They would be remembered as the "early bloomers" of the Ethiopian revolution. Nevertheless, they were not angles nor were they made of diamond. Normal wears and tears, and loose foundation blended with poor coping up behavior had its toll and led them to their downfall.

Sadly, the author deceptively tries to plant the seeds of discontent within the group from the days of their student life. Shockingly, she attributes it to personal misunderstanding between the Debteraw Group and Getachew and Co in the pre-merger phase. I guess it is cheap, and an insult to Getachew too. Despite his age, he knew what he was doing when he opted to merge albeit "alleged differences".

The author elucidates in her books how she lost hope in organized politics. Her reason was partly because of the precipitating factors of rejection by her detention mates. Her

sudden awakening to the world of organized politics came through some inconsequential incident (hosting the wife of a *Meison* member in her cell). She clicked with the lady instantly as she did with Tadelch (understandable as spouses of the “fallen giants”) later in prison. If what the author said is true, it takes the heart of a “Good Samaritan” to do what she claimed she did for the lady. Neither EPRP nor *Meison* had a heart to each other, and her “compassionate” gesture raises more questions than it answers. It would not be far from the truth, if one proposes that her caring heart predated the incident and was an extension to her boyfriend’s stand on the *Meison* (Berhane-Meskel, 1979). The author was ‘what her boyfriend was’ as the saying goes.

The author was a top-notch league activist and was in the *Dergue* “wanted” list. Despite her high profile, she was allowed to pass three weeks at her sister home. This is strange. Those of us who have been in detention centers know this cannot possibly happen to a political prisoner. Incidentally, the police report on Tito and his comrades are now online, and one can countercheck what a *Dergue* torture chamber looked like (Tito, 1979). The rejection by her detention mates (as a reaction for hosting the *Meison* lady) does not sound a good enough reason to trigger her awakening to “abandon” her league membership. If the author thought that her readers would take it in, she is rudely insulting their intelligence. It is arguing that water that gushed out of the firemen pipe caused the fire!! If her reasoning is flawed, what were then the precipitating factors for her sudden “awakening” that culminated in her defection?

Let me play the devil's advocate and argue against the author’s claim to find out flaws in it. There was no awakening, and not even a “silent exit” from organized politics. This argument is as “flimsy” as Getachew’s death presented by the author. Although the proposition is insubstantial, it is logical. If one assumed for an instant that Getachew had spared her from joining his *Rectification Movement*, he/she should go and take reality testing. To think she was an “immaculate virgin” on the *Rectification Movement* would be bordering to naivety. It would also be flanking to gullibility to assume that the collaborators gave her the liberty to operate within the Party knowing she was a league member. One must abandon reason and suspend everything one reads and knows in order



to accept her claim as truthful. To argue that she had already made a lot of damage to the party even before she was caught, and her detention was a facade is quite plausible. One should contextualize to understand why she was disfellowshipped at the *Kefetegna* detention center. The cold-shouldering was a reaction to the unbecoming behavior of a league member. The only “legitimate” measure by detention mates on those who failed to “hold their muds”.

It was not as she claimed that her aunt Mamite intervened on her behalf. That is a cock and bull story. As much as this sounds as a black propaganda her life was spared because of what she did to expose her comrades. This might sound a flimsy rational argument too, but that is how the devil advocates insinuate. Otherwise, how would one explain the killings of *Kuyera* woreda grassroots league members (who were taken into custody with the author) and the saving of “The liaison commanding officer for three provinces”? How would one explain why those poor girls and boys were sent to the killing fields and the author, a top-notch league member, to a retreat to her sister’s home? (Compare the fate of Sirak Teferra her counterpart in the league structure to the northern provinces (Tito, 1979)) Who among us (prisoners of the time) were given the luxury of calling home? Why did she withdraw from taking the cyanide pill, while other did (Tito, 1979)? These and many other issues would lead one to pose and ask the following question. What better way to revenge the killing of her boyfriend other than to help the junta break the party structure? After all, did not the *Anja*’s wreck havoc in Addis and elsewhere. Could not one devilishly argue (though a rickety one) that the author did her assignment given by the *Rectification Movement* and then abrogated her membership? Would not a counter claim trigger a gag reflex, at least on many of us?

Some stories are better left unwritten, and if written one needs to be candid about it. Writing is not washing one’s dirty linen in public, but if it comes to that so be it. The truth should be told, “As it is”. The Addis Ababa rumor mill has been in overdrive ever since *Tower in the sky* come into the market, and I would not like to go deep into it. Let me argue for argument sake, however, on the cause of the suspicious death of Eyob Teferra. Many have gone through the harsh hands of fascist tormentors. It was a general fact that

the prison, and *Makelawi* administrators in partnership with turncoats most often than not include, delete or correct names and other particulars. The reason was quite obvious. Rumor aside, If I hypothesized that Eyob was bum beefed, could I be far from the truth? If I further postulate that Eyob's death was a substitute to save the author's life would I go astray? So this brings me to the grim conclusion that it was not by mistake (as the author would like us to believe) that Eyob was executed but by design. The author name was erased deliberately, and Eyob's name was inserted. This is a simple plot in a story but consistent with the narration. It was the only way for the writer to be "approved to the hood". What the writer does not mention in her book is that the *Dergue* system operates in "Blood in- blood out" principle. One had to expose and kill his comrades to get clemency or be killed, especially so for a high profile figure.

Going back to another issue, I am curious to know, as many others, how the author failed to mention Alemayehu Maru, an active league member and brother of Getachew Maru. How come she flopped to note his atrocities during the "Red Terror"? When all the family members were mentioned how was it possible to miss Alemayehu. It sounds weird, but the author wants to make an omelet without breaking an egg.

Why is the book so much liked by the stoner crowd? Who were the people invited to the meeting hosted by the AAU? There is a lot to be said on the odd set of bedfellows at the AAU. The aficionados gawk neither for the narration nor the romantic elements in the book. It was neither to cognize the *Golden Generation* of the time nor to appreciate the "*Leila Khaled*" of the movement. It was not also to vindicate the "unjustifiable" death of Getachew. It was only because they thought they found "a grave blunder" committed by the party. The plaintiff (and a witness too) is an ex-league confidante of Getachew Maru, and the jury is a mixed crowd with dubious background. What better accusations there would ever be to knockout the *Golden Generation* and kill it good. That is why disgruntles of all shades, color and hue came to host, publish and distribute, *Tower in the sky*. There was too much politicking in the drama. How come Addis Ababa University known to resist printing renowned historical books permitted *Tower in the sky*? This was so while she was no member of academia, and residing in Canada. How come Addis

Ababa University took the trouble of organizing a conference on the book? How come the Bereket and Co. are quite as a mouse, despite the claim that they share the same “history”? Why has the author left Canada for good and moved to Addis Ababa after the book was published. These and many other questions would force one to connect the dots; the dots that make the big picture of dismantling the history of the *Golden Generation*.

Unfortunately, I have not come across the author’s police statement though her name and particulars are mentioned on Tito’s Police statement, “Her file was sent to *Ye BeLaY AkAl*” (Tito, 1979). If the file sees the light of day we will see whom and what she has disclosed to the fascist junta. The fact that her police statement antedates Tito and friends statement says a lot. All the boys and girls on Tito’s file were shot dead in cold blood. It is the only dossier that will absolve her, and till then she will always remain under cloud.

Now the Birhane Meskel police statement is out it will dispel the dark clouds of suspicion people may have on the *Anja*. I hope Tadelech will come with a rejoinder and tell us her version of her lover’s statement. As to the author of *Tower in the Sky*, her life is a wunderkind and her futures seem in her past. I only wish she stops beatification of Getachew and canonize the many fallen heroes and heroines instead.

Ethiopia Hiwote

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