

---

---

## Stories of Women in the Novels of Selected Ethiopian Women Writers

Zerihun Asfaw\*

**Abstract:** In the decade of the 1990s<sup>1</sup> (E.C) the participation of women in the Ethiopian literary landscape became very conspicuous. A considerable number of prose works were published by emerging women authors. We have read the novels of writers such as Tsega Yohannis, Saada Mohammed, Muluwork Asrat, DebreWork Tiruneh, Amarech Tesemma, Meskerem Shiferaw, Teshay Melaku, Yemiwodish Bekele and Sesen Hadush. These and other women writers have narrated stories of women, raised various issues and portrayed different characters. In this article, I would like to provide a brief introduction of stories narrated about women, main issues reflected in the novels and major women characters portrayed. For the brief introduction, I have selected Muluwork Asrat's *ንቡት* (*Nibut*) Amarech Tesemma's *ነፍስ የዘራች ሀይወት* (*Nefs Yezerach Hiwot*) and Teshay Melaku's *ቢስ ራሄል* (*Bis Rahel*).

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of Amharic Language, Literature and Folklore, Addis Ababa University

<sup>1</sup> Publication dates of works in Amharic are according to the Ethiopian Calendar (E.C).

## Introduction

In this paper my aim is to provide a brief introduction of novels published in the decade of the 1990's (E.C) by selected Ethiopian women writers and attempt to answer the questions: What kinds of stories are narrated about women? What do the novelists write about? How are the major female characters depicted in the novels?

To answer these questions, I have selected the works of Muluworq Asrat, Amarech Tesemma and Tsehay Melaku. The three writers are selected on the basis of their concern about women as reflected in their novels and because I believe that they have contributed their share to contemporary Ethiopian Literature hence, deserve recognition.

Muluworq Asrat was born in Addis Ababa. Her father was a judge in different regional courts; her mother was a house wife. She grew up in a family of nine children, completed primary school in Awassa (Southern Ethiopia) and did her high school education in Debrezeyt and Nazreth (42 kms and 90 kms, respectively). She obtained her B.A from Addis Ababa University and M.A. from an American University in Sociology. She lives in Chicago, USA with her husband and two children. Before she headed to the USA for further education, she had worked in an organization that cared for orphans and poor children. Muluworq's novel *Nibut* (the bee) was published in 1993.

Amarech Tesemma was born in Alemgena, a district not far from the capital city Addis Ababa, in a village known as Geja, and raised in Addis Ababa under the care of her aunt. She attended primary education in three different schools, and first got married at the age of fifteen when she was in grade eight. She completed high school at Teferi Mekonen academic and vocational school in Addis Ababa. Amarech, who now lives with her second husband, works in the public relations department of the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Justice. She is currently the vice president of *ዜማ ብዕር* (*Zema Beir*) an Ethiopian women writers association. Her novel *Nefs Yezerach Hiwot* (A Life that Revived) saw the light of day in 1994.

Tsehay Melaku was born in Addis Ababa. She attended elementary school in Debretabor and Gondar in Northern Ethiopia and high school in Menilik II Secondary School, Addis Ababa. She obtained a Diploma in Business Education from Addis Ababa University. She has taught in different high schools for thirty one years. She is a mother of two daughters and now lives in Addis Ababa. She has quitted her teaching position in order to concentrate on her creative activities, writing and painting. Tsehay is currently the president of ዜማ ብዕር (Zema Beir) an Ethiopian women writers Association. She has published five novels *Quasa* "Revenge" (1982), *Anguz* "Scar" (1984) *Bis Rahel* "Rahel the Leper" (1996). *ImeMinet* "Head Nun" (2002) and *Yenisiha Shengo* "Court of Confession" (2004).

In order to answer the mentioned questions I have selected Muluworq's *Nibut* (The Bee)1993, Amarech's *Nefs Yezerach Hiwot* (A Life that Revived) 1994, and Tsehay's *Bis Rahel* (Rahel the Leper)1996. These novels are selected because they mainly reveal stories of major women characters. When one considers the overall picture of research on the novels of Ethiopian women writers, no essays have come out in published form. There are of course, a number of B.A. and M.A theses presented to the Institute of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University, that dealt with characters and images of women in the novels of several women writers such as Alem Bayelign (1984), Abiye Seyoum(1993), Etagegnehu Asres (1997)and Assefa Worqu's (1995) Mulumebet Zenebe's (1996) and M.A theses deserve mention here. Assefa Worqu examined the literary techniques of selected prose works of Ethiopian female authors and he had a section on Tsehay Melaku's two novels *Quasa* and *Anguz*. Mulumebet in her part studied the images of women and men in four novels and three short stories of female writers and among these the earlier novels of Tsehay Melaku *Quasa* (Revenge) and *Anguz* (Scar) were included. In the next section the story and portrayal of the major women characters of each novel and the major issues raised will be presented.

### **Nibut**

*Nibut* is Muluwork's first novel. The main character of the novel is Hilina. Hilina and her father Yefila, live in Addis Ababa in a place called by locals "American Gibi" (American Compound) where low-income people reside. A certain elderly

woman by the name of Belaynesh gives them shelter in her house. Hilina's father is a middle-aged person who earns his daily bread by hewing wood. The story begins when his sickness drives him to the brink of death. Before he dies, however, he expresses concern for the education of his daughter and looks for someone to take care of her. In his will, he entrusts the responsibility to Abaynesh, Hilina's aunt (sister of her mother) who lives in Aqaqi, a town in the suburbs of Addis Ababa. Though Abaynesh has a grudge against him because he married her sister (Hilina's mother) by abduction, he decides while he is in his death bed that Hilina be under the care of Abaynesh. Hilina's father does not have any property other than his axe. He, therefore, leaves the axe as a legacy to Hilina.

A few days after the death of Hilina's father, Belaynesh, as per the will of the deceased, takes Hilina to Aqaqi. In the bus Belaynesh and Hilina are accidentally acquainted with a certain young man called Yared. Belaynesh and Hilina spend some time to locate the house of Hilina's aunt. They find Abaynesh's house with the assistance of Yared. Belaynesh leaves Hilina to her aunt's care and returns to Addis Ababa. Abaynesh is a fairly well off woman who runs a hotel. However, she is a cruel and evil minded person. She forces Hilina to do many laborious tasks inside the hotel. As a result, Hilina finds her aunt's character unbearable. She feels that she is exploited cruelly. Moreover, as her youth blossoms, the eyes of her aunt's customers are all on her, which is not to the liking of her next of kin.

Hilina thinks seriously about her education. It is buried deep in her mind through her father's advice, which she believes is a responsibility entrusted to her. She begins to learn the alphabets with the help of a boy who lives in Abaynesh's house. Her aunt, on the other hand, wants Hilina to handle the many chores at the hotel and gets angry whenever she hears from someone or finds out on her own that she is trying to learn the alphabets.

Hilina has a special sentimental feeling for the axe, the legacy of her father. In fact, she gives so great significance to it that she takes it as a means of relieving herself from her worries and sense of anxiety at the same time deriving psychological satisfaction from it. She considers it as a reminder of her father and as a symbol of the sweat of his labor. For this reason, she identifies herself with it so much so that

she cannot keep herself away from it for a long time. To Abaynesh, this becomes a source of worry. When her business declines, she superstitiously attaches it to a mysterious past and says that it is caused by an evil spirit or by magical charm. Similarly, she says that Hilina has brought bad luck along with the axe. The more Hilina becomes aware of her aunt's disdain to her attempt of educating herself, the more she knows about her aunt's cruelty, the more she recognizes about her aunt's negative attitude towards the axe, the greater Hilina becomes tired of the situation around her. Eventually she disappears from Abaynesh's hotel. When Abaynesh finds about this, she becomes indignant due to the action taken by Hilina and she colludes with the police to have her niece imprisoned.

When Yared is informed of the fact that Hilina has been put in prison, he bails her out. He takes her to his house and they live together as very good friends. He proves to be a person who plays a supporting role in the life of Hilina. He sends her to school. On her part, she manages the house and they live together sharing a feeling of compassion. She derives spiritual satisfaction from going to school since she realizes that her father's will is being fulfilled.

At school, she encounters adjustment problems as she is older than the rest of her classmates. In addition, as she walks to and from the school, men harass her with offers of dating. She overcomes both problems and pursues her education with determination and becomes a high achiever. Her aunt approaches Yared and asks him to help iron out her conflict with Hilina. After some hesitation, Hilina agrees to let bygones be bygones. Yet, she declines her aunt's offer to move to her aunt's place. The hotel business begins to deteriorate and Abaynesh begins to suffer from sickness. This compels her to seek for the return of Hilina more than ever before, but to no avail. Meanwhile, Yared, Hilina's mentor goes abroad for further education. Before his departure, he asks his friend Hassan to support Hilina on his behalf.

Hilina completes her secondary education. She sticks to her belief that it is only through education that one can become free from poverty and oppression. To realize it, she joins the Kotebe Teachers' Training College in Addis Ababa. She acquires the training and graduates with distinction. At this juncture, she begins love affair with Hassan. Later however, she discovers that Hassan is married and their

relationship comes to an abrupt end. Following her graduation from college, she begins to teach in Assela, 175 kms, South of Addis Ababa. She develops an amicable relationship with her colleagues. One day, a relative of one of her colleagues dies and they mourn the death together. A brother of her colleague by the name of Mesfin comes from USA because of the mourning. Hilina and Mesfin get introduced, fall in love with each other and decide to get married. Hilina goes to the USA with her husband and she starts a new life there.

Not long through the marriage, Hilina's undying desire to further her education motivates her to join a higher learning institution. Contrary to her wishes, her husband demonstrates a craving to have a child from her. He tells her to give priority to his wish of having a baby. This incompatibility creates conflict between them, ultimately resulting in divorce. She secures lodging at a friend's house and later finds out that her friend Rahel is a former girl friend of Mesfin. Although Mesfin has abandoned Rahel in favor of Hilina, he secretly visits her from time to time. In one of Rahel's and Hilina's conversations, Rahel tells about the bad character of Mesfin and other men like him. She tells her that men want to employ women as a sex object to only satisfy their needs.

At the end of the story, to Hilina's great surprise, Rahel tells her that Mesfin has impregnated her in one of their secret outings. Then Rahel asks Hilina to pardon her for intruding in between her husband and herself. Rahel feels guilty and attempts to commit suicide by falling from the height of the apartment building. Although saddened and astonished by the situation for some time, Hilina looks at the matter philosophically and she calms Rahel down. After grappling with the complexity of the problem, she pardons Rahel for what she has done.

From the time of her childhood, Hilina is portrayed as an intelligent and forward looking girl. She has an inquisitive mind and she never holds herself back from asking questions to satisfy her curiosity. She is considerate, and interested in broadening her knowledge. She does any kind of work even during her childhood days. She is tireless and always makes herself busy. She is always hard working and is known for her straightforward attitude and frankness.

Hilina is committed to her cause and this is reflected in her spiritual strength. She gives high regard to education more than anything else. As her father planted in her mind of childhood the idea that a person can overcome poverty only through education, she held on to the wordings of her father with great dedication. On his death bed, he had said to her, “If you had education beyond and above your clear mind I would be greatly satisfied. Because of our poverty we have nobody among our family who is educated. My aspiration to send you to school at all costs is great. Unfortunately I am poor.” Muluworq (1993:7). “በዚህ ንፁህ አስተሳሰብሽ ላይ የተማርሽ ብትሆኚ ምንኛ የረካሁ በሆንኩ። በድህነታችን ምክንያት በዘራችን የተማረ የለም። አንቺን ለምኔም፣ ለፍቼም ለማስተማር የነበረኝ ምኞት የላቀ ነበር። ግን ምን ያደርጋል፣ አቅሙ ጠፋ።”

These words of her father ring in her mind all the time. It is for this reason that she is determined to pursue her education, and she succeeds in her endeavor.

Owing to the strength of character she possesses, most of the time Hilina resolutely finds solutions on her own to the problems that she faces. She refrains from seeking the assistance of others. When she leaves Abaynesh’s house, she knows quite well that she has no relative in Aqaqi to turn to. What she chooses is to go to a small hotel where she rents a room and starts to live on her own. Similarly, at the end of the story when her husband and Rahel do injustice to her, it is Hilina herself who finds a solution to the problem. This character of hers weaves in along the narrative.

Hilina is a kind of person who does not offend people. She pardons all those who have done injustice to her. She makes them feel ashamed of their actions that may help them become better persons. Those who offend her admit their mistakes and apologize to her. We observe, for example, that Hilina accepts Abaynesh’s apology for the serious moral damage she causes to her. She does the same when she discovers that her husband Mesfin makes Rahel pregnant. So concerned is Hilina about Rahel’s state of mind that she does everything possible so that Rahel will not feel guilty.

Hilina is patient, but she does not allow her patience to compromise her principles. When matters take a wrong direction, she does not try to correct them by resorting to evil. On the contrary, she advises people to correct their mistakes viewing their shortcomings with patience.

Hilina does not allow emotions to upset her sense of duty. The cruel character of her aunt and the work load given to her do not prevent her from carrying out whatever her aunt tells her to do. Her aunt objects to Hilina's endeavor to educate herself. But as long as she stays in her aunt's house, Hilina believes that reacting in a positive manner to the needs of her aunt and fulfilling the demands expected of her is a necessity. She leaves her aunt's house at the end because the behavior of her aunt conflicts with her principles.

She inherited these character traits from her father. She is also able to develop them because she has passed through the same environment of poverty and hardship as her father did. During childhood, she had seen her father toiling to make ends meet. There was her father's strong yearning to be educated. All these have contributed to the strength of character in her.

She withstands the ups and downs of life wherever she goes. She struggles against the pressures imposed on her by certain individuals. At the same time, she is able to overcome the problems that she encounters with regard to her educational ambitions. This is the way she is portrayed at every stage of the story.

Hilina believes that her father's axe has a symbolic impact on her life wherever she goes. It imbued strength and stamina to her character. It gives her support and inspiration behind the scene and helps her to become successful in all her ventures. The axe represents her father's love and aspiration and acts as a means by which he communicates with her. "This is the only legacy that my father left to me. This axe always reminds me of my father with all his kindness and his love of work. It also gives me strength." (Muluworq: 38) *(አባቴ ያወረሰኝ ቢኖር ይህን መጥረቢያ ነው። ይህ መጥረቢያ ሁልጊዜ አባቴን ከነደግነቱ፣ ከነሥራ ወዳድነቱ ያስታውሰኛል። ብርታትም የሚሰጠኝ ይመስለኛል።)* is a remark that we hear very often from her.



Yared, who gives accommodation to Hilina when her stay with her aunt became impossible, and who has a perfect sense of fraternity to her untarnished by sexual feelings, asks her what the axe means to her. She replies as follows:

When my father died the two things he left for me are this axe and his trousers and jacket. When he returns home after hewing wood, he places this axe close to me and gives me words of advice and fatherly feelings. This axe is the tool he used to find the means for nurturing me and it has gone wherever my father went. I quarreled with my aunt because she tried to take it away from me. This axe bears the sweat of my father that I cherish forever. I have got comfort and consolation in it I don't want someone to meddle with it. I don't want to lose sight of it. (Muluworq: 100).

... አባቴ ሲሞት ትቶልኝ የሄደው ይህንንና አንድ የራሱን ሱሪና ኮት ብቻ ነው። አባቴ ከእንጨት ፈለግ ሥራው ሲመለስ ይህን መጥረቢያ አጠገቡ አስቀምጦ የአባትነት ሙቀቱንና ምክሩን ይለግሰኝ ነበር። ይህ መጥረቢያ እኔን ለማሳደግ ከአባቴ ጋር አብሮ ተንከራቷል። ... ከአክሲዮን ጋር እንደጣላ ያደረገኝ ይህን መጥረቢያ ለመውሰድ በመሞከራቸው ነበር። አሁንም በዚህ መጥረቢያ ላይ የአባቴ ወዝ ይገኝበታል። ሲከፋኝ ይህ መጥረቢያ ነው የሚያጽናናኝ። ስለዚህ ማንም እንዲነካው ካጠገቤም እንዲርቅ አልፈልግም።

It is in this manner that she explains the significance she attaches to the axe. The axe is not a mere souvenir. It is a symbol of hope for Hilina, and her hope is education. Like the axe splits wood into many pieces, she believes that it penetrates into every corner of life to unravel for her the mysteries of knowledge. Such an object cannot be stolen or robbed from her. It is rather a source of lasting prosperity and wealth and a beacon of education.

Hilina views everything from a positive standpoint. She does not give room to possible evil intentions by other people. No doubt Abaynesh hates Hilina's father and she considers the idea of removing the axe from her house contrary to Hilina's wish. This is due to her superstitious belief that the axe has some charm that is likely

to bring doom upon her. Hilina does not wake up in good time to notice the intrigues Abaynesh weaves against her in collusion with her servants. Such weakness is one aspect of the flaw in her character.

Some features of poverty have also been reflected in the novel. Major attention has been given to the idea that to defeat poverty it is necessary to promote education. Hilina's story that starts from the so-called "American Gibi" (American compound) and goes all the way to the United States of America has, therefore, education as its central theme, and especially the education of girls.

Women should be educated to the level they desire. Their goal should not be limited to the service they give to men as partners in marriage and as child bearers. They should be able to overcome every obstacle against their education through their strength of character. This is what is portrayed in the life of Hilina. Hilina's life is full of trials and tribulations. Her story manifests the fact that if women struggle continuously and persist with the goals they want to achieve, they will realize their hopes and dreams.

There are men who stand on the side of women in their endeavor to attain their objectives. In this respect, the relationship between Yared and Hilina is exemplary. Their story also reflects the truth that it is worthless to believe in superstition and to be deceived by magic and witchcraft as the deeds of Abaynesh.

Muluworq upholds that, all in all, the solution to life's problems is education. For her, education is the take off stage for a better future. Being a woman does not mean accepting low status, simply satisfying men's desire and limiting one's horizon because of lack of education. Through the life of her major character, Hilina, Muluworq reiterates that education is pivotal in the assertion of women's rights and a unique tool for their liberation.

According to her, education broadens the frontiers of knowledge. It is instrumental for gaining the prosperity of a nation and overcoming the scourge of poverty. In addition to the issues of education, the story projects the effects of love, hatred and jealousy as well as commitment to principles and the machinations of evil.

---

**Nefs Yezerach Hiwot**

Nefs Yezerach Hiwot (Life that Revived) is Amarech Tesemma's maiden work. The story in the main depicts the life of a rural woman and her family. The character Yewubdar lives with her husband and children in a rural village not far from Debremarqos in the northern part of the country. The main story focuses on the situation of two women characters, Yewubdar and her daughter Tesfanesh.

In the story, Yewubdar's husband Digafeneh agrees to give his daughter Tesfanesh in marriage to a young man who lives in the neighborhood. As per the tradition, a group of selected elders from the community approach him and present the marriage proposal. When he breaks the news to his wife she becomes furious and objects to the proposal on the ground that Tesfanesh is too young to marry. To her dismay, Digafeneh insists that his decision cannot be contested and his commitment to the elders shall remain intact.

The farsighted mother does not want to see her ten year old daughter to suffer the adversities of early marriage like her, and devises a way of stopping the engagement. She decides to request the help of her aunt Yimegnushal who lives in Addis Ababa and owns a hotel. Since Yewubdar is illiterate she asks the help of a literate young man in the neighborhood to write a letter to her aunt. In the letter, she sends a message expressing that she needs her aunt's assistance badly as she has become bed-ridden due to a serious illness. As the call is urgent her aunt responds immediately and arrives at her niece's village. All this is accomplished without the knowledge of Yewubdar's husband.

When her aunt Yimegnushal realizes that her niece is in good health she wonders as to why she summoned her so urgently. Yewubdar releases the whole secret and tells her that she is the only person who can help her get out of the terrible predicament she and her daughters are in. Yewubdar informs her aunt that someone has proposed to marry her daughter Tesfanesh who is only ten years old. She further reveals to her aunt that her husband Digafeneh has told her that Tesfanesh has attracted the eyes of many young men, and he has been approached by distinguished elders of the community requesting him to give the hands of his daughter to a young man called

Adane Yibeltal. She tells her aunt that she objects to the proposal but her husband insists that they should not miss this pleasing opportunity.

After informing her aunt about the whole situation, Yewubdar begs her aunt to take her two daughters Tesfanesh and Kokobe to the capital city, Addis Ababa so that Tesfanesh can escape the proposed marriage. Her aunt agrees and on the day of her departure back to Addis Ababa the two girls accompany her to the capital city without the knowledge of their father.

When Digafeneh comes home from his daily work, Yewubdar tells him that Tesfanesh and Kokobe have gone to Addis Ababa with Yimegnushal adding that there was nothing she could do to stop them from going there. Infuriated with the news, he decides on the spot to go to Addis Ababa and bring his daughters back.

In Addis Ababa, as soon as he meets his children, he instructs them to return to their village but they resolutely refuse to go back. They enthusiastically tell him that they have started school. As a whole they tell him that they are happy and comfortable with their life and going back is just unthinkable.

Eventually he gives in that Kokobe can stay but insists that Tesfanesh has to return immediately. Disappointed with this, Tesfanesh disappears from Yimegnushal's house. When her father is informed about her disappearance and that her whereabouts are unknown he bitterly expresses his regret at his decision. Later, however, Tesfanesh is found and her father agrees that she can stay with her aunt and he leaves all alone for his village.

After years passed Yimegnushal's daughter Hirut who is living in the USA comes to Ethiopia to visit her mother. During her stay in Addis Ababa she is impressed by the character and physical appearance of Tesfanesh and decides to take Tesfanesh to the USA along with her. While Tesfanesh settles in the USA, her sister Kokobe completes her education and graduates as a medical doctor.

---

Tesfanesh is approached by different men for love and friendship but due to her introvert character she fends off their requests. This offends her mentor Hirut. She advises her to accept the request, and stick to one of them and get married before her marriageable age passes. Despite Hirut's persistent advice on such matters, Tesfanesh adheres to her principle. She stays alone for quite long and spends her spare time by praying in the church.

One day, a peculiar incident happens while she comes out of the church. She sees at a glance a young man who is praying in one corner of the church; she feels something inside, she cannot remember where exactly she has seen that face. When she starts to leave the church, her shoes skid on the slippery ground and the young man holds her arm firmly before she falls down and tells her to walk cautiously. He is also puzzled as to where he knows her. Later, in their conversation, they discover that they know each other since their childhood. Tesfanesh meets Adane Yibeltal the young boy from her village who asked to marry her many years back. After this incident, Tesfanesh and Adane meet regularly and finally they decide to unite in marriage. They come to Ethiopia and their wedding ceremony is held amongst their families in the rural village where they were born.

By narrating this story, Amarech reveals the social pressure imposed on rural girls by custom such as early marriage and the physical hazards and consequences it entails. She tells that children born one after another without spacing are deprived of comfort and good upbringing, while their mothers are exposed to additional burden and problems. The novel shows in detail not only that rural life adversely affects women disproportionately but also that the traditional and cultural forces impinge on the participation of women in education.

All this is noticeable in the life of Yewubdar, a mother of six children. It was when she was ten years old that her husband proposed to her family to marry her. This was done in accordance with the tradition. The family responded willingly, but was obliged to stay for another two years because their crops were destroyed by pests resulting in shortage of food. Thus, the marriage had to wait until she was twelve years old. She married Digafeneh and gives birth without proper spacing. In her husband's homestead she becomes the drawer of water and the hewer of wood, in

addition to grinding grain and preparing food. Combined with the demands of motherhood, these chores make her life unbearable.

Yewubdar's cousin comes to the rural area from time to time to visit her. The way she is dressed, her manner of speaking, as well as the way she walks make a deep impression on her. Yewubdar attributes her backwardness to lack of education. She is deeply disturbed when she thinks that she has been condemned to live such a low standard of living. She becomes spiritually jealous of her cousin. She expresses a tone of surprise and appreciation to city life and gives high values to education because it has enabled the ex-rural women she knew to be better looking and neat. She says out of envy thus,

Schooling is best! ... the women whom we know for not washing her cloth regularly is now neat and attractive because she went to school. Luck is essential for everything! Look at me, I bear children every year without proper spacing, grind grain for making traditional drink for a religious feast. What else can be done?" (Amarech 1994: 1-2)

*ወይ መማር ደገ! ... ያቺ ድሮ ቀሚሷን በዓመት እንኳ ውኃ  
የማይነካው ዛሬ በመማር እንዲህ ተሸቀርቅራ መጣች! ለሁሉም  
ዕድል ያስፈልጋል! የኔ ብጤ እድለቢሷማ በዓመት በዓመት  
ዲቃላዋን እየቀፈቀፈች የሰንበቴ አሻሮዋን ትፍጭ እንጂ ምን  
ይደረግ!*

The psychological problem she is facing as a result of her being uneducated denies her peace of mind. Yewubdar believes that the situation in which she finds herself is a direct outcome of the lack of education. However, she is more concerned about the future of her children in this regard. She aspires that her children will be better off if they are educated. She wishes that the chances awaiting her children will not be the same as her own and that they will not go in the same direction as she did. Since the root cause of her problem is marrying at a very young age, she worries too much that her children may fall victim to the same fate. Conscious that she lacks the

capacity to prevent her children from this predicament, she prays to the Almighty to change the situation in her favor with the following lamentation:

*“Oh! God I became bitter and complain  
Because you blessed me with children  
Without spacing year out year in  
I know not care or comfort  
But shed blood and toil without rest  
I care the least for break and enjoyment.  
Please the Almighty! fulfil my aspiration  
Provide chance for my kids to obtain education. (Amaretech: 2)*

*ብቻ ፈጣሪዬ እኔ እማማርሮህ፣  
በሥራህ ገብቼ ሁሌ የምወቅስህ፣  
እንዳው በዓመት በዓመት ልጅ በማስታቀፍህ፣  
ተኝቶ መታረስ ወገም አልደረሰኝ፣  
ደሜን እያዘራሁ እባክናለሁኝ፣  
እኔስ መንደላቀቅ ማረፊ ቀርቶብኝ፣  
እባክህ ልጆቼን ለትምህርት አብቃልኝ።*

The sufferings and pains she is going through are not as important as the future of her children. She believes that life has no meaning without education. She is aware that education is the only path through which rural life can be improved and the deprivation faced by people like her can be removed.

Yewubdar is a woman with determination. She is far sighted and consistent in whatever she does. She puts her thoughts into practice without any hesitation. For example, when she is informed that her first daughter Tesfanesh is being considered for marriage, she immediately decides to send a letter to her aunt to take Tesfanesh to Addis Ababa so that she can escape the trap of early marriage. Although she could not bear the thought of separating herself from them, she stands her ground and convinces herself of the necessity never to give in to her sentiments. She tightens her belt as a sign that she means business. She controls her emotions and

expresses her feelings by saying “No! I should control my feelings. I have to be decisive. Otherwise, I will be a witness to their suffering that is likely to unfold in front of my eyes. I can’t do that! Never!” (Amarech: 7). “የለም! መባባት የለብኝም። ቆራጥ መሆን አለብኝ። አለዚያማ የልጆቼን መንገላታት አፍጥጨ ልጠብቀው ነው። አይደረግም! በጭራሽ አላደረገውም።”

Yewubdar is mature in her thinking. Another strong aspect of her character is her wisdom. She has the competence to persuade others in any undertaking she deems necessary. She nips the early marriage of her daughter in the bud through her effort and the methods she devises. She carefully plans a way for her children to be taken by her aunt without the knowledge of her husband.

In her childhood, Yewubdar does not have any opportunity to be educated, but she understands the value of education. She is portrayed as quick minded, strong and visionary rural woman. She is skilful and ready to change herself for the better.

In any society, there are people who accept the existing social norms and culture. On the other hand, there are others who realize the harm caused by certain traditions and cultures and oppose these. Still, there are others who, though faced with difficulties, come out victorious because of their determination and commitment to a cause. All these are what Yewubdar has demonstrated. That the prevailing culture exerts undue pressure especially on women is undeniable. Yewubdar’s experience has shown that to do away with this pressure, women have to be strong and wage their struggle in unison.

By narrating the story of the rural woman Yewubdar and her family in her novel *Nefs Yezerach Hiwot*, (A Life that Revived) Amarech Tesemma has reflected that she upholds the idea that early marriage and heavy load of house hold chores are among the reasons that impede the education of girls (Emebet 2003:28).

### **Bis Rahel**

The main focus of Tsehay’s third novel *Bis Rahel* (Rahel the Leper) is on the life of the main character Rahel Darge. Rahel was born and brought up in Addis Ababa in a



---

locality known as Cassinchis. The exact place could be pinpointed in the background of Enderase Hotel beyond a back street market, where a panorama of tin roofed houses opens before the viewer. A large number of people dwell in these houses. The rusty corrugated iron sheets and the congested and shaky walls that support them reveal the poverty within. Rahel lives in one of these shanty houses with her mother and sisters.

Rahel's family was well off; her father was a goldsmith who used to trade in silver and gold for no less than 35 years. After his death, however, because of the mixture of laxity and generosity of the character of Rahel's mother, the family's wealth deteriorates day by day and reaches the lowest point making life difficult for the family members. Rahel has an elder brother and three younger sisters. None of them could become self-supporting and, least of all, her twin sisters who completed high school but spent their time looking for jobs. As a result, in order to sustain the family, Rahel's mother is compelled to sit all day in the lowest class market peddling sundry food items while the youngest daughter, Woinishet, sells cooked and fried corn to contribute to the family's income. The household chores are left for Rahel, but, on top of that, she does some embroidery from which she derives some money to make ends meet.

The family, and particularly Rahel, suffers more from rumor than from shortage of income. Her mother is labeled as a leper (locally known "bisgela") by the community. The community believes that she inherited the disease from her ancestors, though she claims that she has an ancestry of the purest kind. She speaks of her ancestors as being highly reputed for their fighting spirit and heroism, but this does not stop others from maintaining the ill conceived opinion. The truth is that Rahel's mother has lost four fingers due to an accident and she is not infected with the disease. The effect of this is that it casts a shadow on Rahel's relationship with the opposite sex. Asegedech a local beer seller and neighbor of Rahel's family capitalizes on the rumor beyond measure. Asegedech has been instrumental in driving a wedge between Rahel and her boyfriend Ephraim who has been courting her for some time. She was at the point of getting married with this young man. Later, however, influenced by the rumor he changes his mind.

This puts Rahel's mother in a dilemma. She is convinced that her daughter is gifted both in beauty and character. After keeping her sorrow to herself for a long time, she concludes that nothing works without good luck. She tells her friend that beauty and character are worthless unless there is good luck behind them. No wonders that she is accustomed to saying:

If beauty had had value or meaning, my daughters wouldn't have faced all the sufferings they had undergone. Beauty alone is nothing. It has to be graced with luck. Look at them, they possess everything, be it beauty, physical form skill and character. And yet no person approaches them seriously asking for their hands in marriage" (Tsehay 1996: 92).

*የመልክማ ነገር ዋጋ ቢኖረው ኖሮ የኔ ልጆች አይንከራተቱም  
አይንገላቱም ነበር። ባዶ መልክ ባዶ ነው። በዕድል በረከት  
ካልተሟሸ። ይኸው የምታይው ነው ... ከመልክ፣ ከቁመና፣ ከሙያ፣  
ከባሕሪ የጎደላቸው የለም ... ልጆቼን ለትዳር የሚመኝ ግን  
አላየሁም።*

Rahel's academic performance has been remarkable. In her school life, she was considered as one of the best students. She won prizes. She pursued her studies seriously and properly. She was looked up highly by her peers and the school community at large. In addition to the high grades she scored, she took part in numerous clubs and won the admiration of many of her schoolmates. Furthermore, she received various certificates of participation above and beyond the recognition she had won.

Unfortunately, the outcome of her school leaving certificate examination left much to be desired. It would not enable her to join an institution of higher learning and to meet her earnest desire for education. She is, therefore, forced to stay at home for a period of no less than three years engaged in household chores and seeking employment opportunities in government offices.

Rahel has hoped that she will secure a government employment in spite of her respect for self initiated work and her enterprising spirit. With time her hope wanes and she realizes that her desire in this direction will not materialize. Without giving much consideration to her endeavor along this line, she becomes more determined to consolidate and strengthen her mother's business that she also regards as her own. Therefore, she goes to small suburban towns and starts to buy commodities at cheaper prices. Meanwhile, she unexpectedly gets a job at the residence of Kenya's Ambassador to Ethiopia with the help of a commission agent and on account of her educational qualification. Although the task involves cleaning the residential quarters, she does not turn it down and it brings about a change on her standard of living as well as that of her family, however limited that may be. Her twin sisters follow the good example she has set for them and take up coffee cleaning operation that is not viewed favorably by a large number of people in the community.

In her work place while cleaning a room she finds a wallet that contains lots of cash in it. It is discovered that it belongs to the Ambassador's Secretary and Rahel gives it back to the owner intact. She demonstrates with this act her loyalty and honesty to her employer and she is honored and acclaimed for it in addition to receiving rewards. The incident later becomes a springboard for the social ladder that she starts to climb.

Rahel's hard work together with her polite conduct and honesty earns her a special reputation in the eyes of her supporters, one of whom seeks a better job opportunity for her. Mr. James Willy, the Ambassador's Secretary helps her to apply for a job in the Ethiopian Air Lines. In addition to educational qualification, the criterion for employment was oral and written proficiency in languages including English. Her internal aptitude and external physical appearance enables her to qualify as a hostess trainee. Thus, she begins to work as an employee in the airlines business in a circumstance or situation that was least expected.

Subsequently, a love affair develops between her and Mr. James Willy who paved the way for her employment as an airline hostess. He, therefore, extends more help to her in the form of finance and managerial skill that, together with her own

resources and those of two other partners, led to the opening of a multipurpose entertainment club known as the Yetifsihit Korebta (Hill of Happiness).

In her flights to Europe, Rahel always brings different kinds of jewellery and costumes and opens a boutique. She also gives employment to many individuals in her village inside the recreational centre depending on their abilities and character. She becomes successful in the business and is able to increase her income from various sources. As a result, she channels some of her money to a humanitarian oriented organization that she believes reflects the objective of her life. She corresponds with regional and international welfare agencies and establishes an orphanage named Tesfa Lewegen Amba (Hope for Compatriots Center). This orphanage that takes care of the education of children occupies a prominent place within Rahel's organization.

New, hope dawns in the village for the underprivileged who suffer from the piercing rays of the scorching sun at daytime and from the biting cold and freezing air at night. Those who scavenge for crumbs of bread in garbage piles find refuge in the camp that Rahel has set up.

Rahel appoints a general manager to head the village. She is attracted to him, but she does not reveal it. This makes her life incomplete and let her feel that she is lacking something. Her efforts, strength and aspirations push her up to the highest point of her career, but her private life is restless so that many people cannot but sympathize with her. Her inner sentiments are not expressed openly. At the same time, there are clues that she has special regard for the man she admires. He, on his part, kept his distance from her fearing that the rumor about leprosy could be true. It has been quite a time now since he has also begun admiring her beauty in addition to her stamina. The love she has concealed tends to produce a destructive consequence in an expected occasion that involves her sister-in-law. Its form and content changes for the worse subjecting her to a calamity of the worst kind and increasing the hurdles she encounters beyond proportion. Fortunately, both Rahel and her partner escape the death trap prepared for them and finally get married.

She proves to her life partner that the rumor about leprosy is not true. Above all, her wealth demonstrates that poverty was a transitory phase in life that can be swept aside by anyone who is determined to combine hard work with a persistent effort to accomplish one's goal in life.

Rahel turns out to be as successful as she herself prophesies early in life:

Definitely I have reached to a decision. From now on, my main aim is to become a successful person. I have to find myself as successful person in this society and among the people who have discriminated me. I have decided to become successful person today more than ever before. Enough is enough! My aim is to pull out myself from the society which is enmeshed in moral decadence, poverty, rumor and laziness and put myself on the apex (Tsehay: 17).

*በርግጥ አንድ ውሳኔ እንዲኖረኝ አስቤአለሁ። ወስኛለሁም። ከእንግዲህ ዋናው ቁምነገራ ሰው መሆን ነው። በዚህ በናቀኝ ሰውና ጎበዘተሰብ መካከል ሰው ሆኜ መገኘት አለብኝ። ሰው ለመሆን ከመቼውም ዛሬ ወስኛለሁ ብቃ። ... “በሞራልና በኤኮኖሚ ድህነት ታንቆ አሉባልታ ሲያናፍስ በስንፍና ተርመጥምጦ ካለው ጎበዘተሰብ መካከል እንደምንም ራሴን መንጥቁ ወደ ከፍታ ማድረስ ነው።*

Finally she liberates herself from poverty and rises up to the summit of her ideal. Her wish materializes just as she hoped it would. She becomes a celebrity and the talk of the town not only due to her wealth, but also due to the support that she provides to the poor.

Rahel believes that no one should be discriminated on the ground of her/his economic standing. She contends that those people who think little of others because they are poor are morally weak. For her, poverty is not the measure of personality; it is only one aspect of life. Poverty is not like leprosy; it is rather a phenomenon that can be eradicated by exerting the necessary effort. Most of all, she despises discrimination and abhors feeling of inferiority. A case in point is the time she receives a letter from her boyfriend telling her that their relationship has been totally

terminated and that she should think of it as if it never occurred. She does not grovel to him. She decides to prove both to him and to other rumor-mongers who she really is. She does this by changing herself through being fully committed to hard work.

She is not self-conscious when she is engaged in conversation with anyone. She does not worry nor does she feel shy. She is straightforward and polite giving due respect to others. She has a strong character that reflects itself from her inner will. A good example is her reaction to the advances made by someone who tries to take advantage of the fact that she is unemployed and could succumb to his passion. She realizes that he is trying to pull her down into a deeper problem than before and she surmounts the temptation by upholding her principles.

Rahel has a daunting opinion on any matter or idea that is not to her taste. She can perceive the thinking of others in advance and demonstrates innate wisdom of judging it on its merit. She never loses hope. If she tries a certain action and it does not prove successful, she tries another. She wishes to achieve her aspirations through a ceaseless effort and never makes her wishes an end by themselves.

In pursuit of her relentless desire to become a successful person she believes that this can be achieved through hard work only. To attain recognition and reach at a higher standard of life, in a society that looks down individuals and that makes rumors its sole preoccupation she develops a conviction that she may even have to stoop down and do a menial job.

Rahel believes that one shouldn't underestimate the value of work. Even vending small items at a small backstreet market could lead to a successful business that goes beyond subsistence for someone who engages in it sincerely and seriously. For Rahel any person who carries out his work with a purpose is a disciplined person. His ultimate goal provides him with incentive. He attaches much value to the time he spends, the efforts he exerts and the results he gets. He uses these resources properly so that their value will not depreciate. On the contrary, there is a kind of work that has no purpose other than the sole aim of meeting one's daily need for food and other basic necessities.

Rahel further thinks that her life will be more meaningful if she creates her own work rather than simply promoting the work initiated by others. She tells her friend about her plans to start peddling at a small backstreet market. Her friend does not support the idea wholeheartedly. Rahel resolutely challenges her friend saying:

Up to now, you and I were looking for a readymade job. We were tirelessly searching for a job created by others. As for me, from today on I'll strive to create my own job. Even if others may view it contemptuously, I'll stick to it giving it the respect it deserves. I'll devote my time and energy to it and I am dead sure that I will be successful. Mark my words (Tsehay: 18).

እኔና አንቺ እስከሳራ የፈለግነው ሥራ የተዘጋጀ ሥራ ነው። ሌሎች የፈጠሩትን ሥራ ነው ለማግኘት ስንደክም የኖርነው። አሁን ግን እኔ ራሴ ሥራ እፈጥራለሁ። የምፈጥረውን ሥራ ቢናቅም እኔ አክብራ እይዘዋለሁ። ጊዜና ጉልበቴን አፈስበታለሁ። እንደዚያም እንደዚያም አድርጌ ውጤት እጨብጥበታለሁ። አትጠራጠራ።

This indicates the strength and determination of Rahel. It is obvious that Rahel has a poor family that greatly depends on her income for its existence compelling her to seek more money than she can secure with the sweat of her brow. She does not want to obtain money in any other way, least of all in a way that places her personal integrity in doubt.

In the story of Rahel we encounter individuals who attempt to spoil the direction of her life, much as there are those who contributed to ameliorate it. As a whole it can be argued that the main concern of the writer is to show the success of women. She has created a character that in the most part is triumphant in her attempt to conquer poverty. She started with a small backstreet market and ended up in a huge organization that cares mainly for the poor. In addition, Tsehay wants to show that women have the capacity to contribute to the society provided that they get an opportunity.

By narrating the story of Rahel and depicting her strength and commitment towards self reliance the writer has revealed the various individual and societal obstacles that hinder women from achieving their goals. She has also shown that as there are wicked men that hamper the development of women there are also men who give support to women and struggle to pave the way for their success.

### **Conclusion**

Muluworq Asrat, Amarech Tesemma and Tsehay Melaku introduced briefly in this paper have revealed, I believe the struggle of women for self reliance. They have indicated the path their main characters followed in order to bring about change in their lives. They have also shown the obstacles the characters encounter while working towards achieving their goals. We notice that at the end of their stories the characters emerge triumphant and it can be argued that there is an air of optimism in the works of the three women authors. It is, however, worth noting that success in life is achieved mainly through the perseverance of the women and partly because of the support provided to them by their mentors.

When the reader is introduced to Hilina in *Nibut*, Yewubdar and her daughter Tesfanesh in *Nefs Yezerach Hiwot* and Rahel in *Bis Rahel* at the beginning of the story they all were poverty stricken individuals. Defeating this social evil was the major goal that they wanted to achieve. It is reflected in the novels that in the main the weapon to defeat poverty is education and girls' education is a major issue given prominent place particularly in the novels of Muluwork and Amarech, Tsehay seems to be saying that education is not the only remedy to all the problems. In light of her characters eventual success she seems to be saying "we don't have to put all our eggs in one basket"



---

I believe that it is very important to listen to what women are saying in their creative works. The novels deserve a more elaborate analysis of both content and form. I hope other researchers will give due attention to this in order to provide a fuller and richer understanding of the novels.

### References

- Abiy Seum. 1993. *Sineshufawi his Beishosamma Worq inna Bejeda Negn*. B.A. Thesis, Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.
- Alem Bayelign. 1984. *Setoch Besetoch Ayen*. B.A. Thesis, Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.
- Amarech Tesemma. 1994. *Nefs Yezerach Hiwot*. Addis Ababa: Women Writers Club.
- Assefa Worku. 1995. An Analysis of Literary Techniques in some of the Prose Works of Ethiopian Women Authors (1959-1985) Ethiopia. M.A. Thesis, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.
- Emebet Mulugeta. 2003. "Problems Encountered and Coping Strategies Employed by Female Students in Addis Ababa High Schools." *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, Vol. 23(2), pp.27-61.
- Etagegnehu Asres 1997. *Yeaterarek Teknik Ina Yegetsebahire Aqerarets Befiqir Ina Sidet*.
- Mulumbet Zenebe. 1996. A Comparative Analysis of the Images of Men and Women in the Works of Some Ethiopian Women Writers. M.A. Thesis, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.
- Muluworq Asrat. 1993. *Nibut*. Addis Ababa: Birhanina Selam Printing Enterprise.
- Tsehay Melaku, *Quasa. Bis Rahel*. 1996. Addis Ababa: Educational Materials Production and Distribution Agency.