

## Postmodern Thoughts in Dawit's *Alämānor*: Critiques on Normativity, Absolute Truth and the Sovereign Self

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### Abstract

*The advancement of communication technology in this postmodern era exposed people for multiple narratives – viewpoints that are often subversive to the existing metanarratives. This condition, in turn, delegitimizes objective worldviews such as truth, social norms, self-identity and so on. But is there such a thing as objective truth? To what extent does an individual's inner self be affected by normativity in the Ethiopian social setting? Having these couple of questions in mind, an attempt to scrutinize how Dawit in his novel *Alämānor* (2017, literally translated as "Nonexistence", deconstructs people's conception about truth and reprehends one's obedience to collective norms at the expense of their inner self is made. In this analysis, we illustrate that the novel is devoted to prove how people's intuitive knowledge about 'truth' is mistaken, and condemn some social norms that make people pretend to behave, communicate and act against their inner selves.*

**Keywords:** Normativity, postmodernism, the self, truth, worldview

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## **Introduction**

Derrida asserts in his seminal work *Of Grammatology* (1976) that the meaning of a text is only contained within the text. However, texts do not have a fixed meaning because different readers can interpret them in multiple ways. Barthes's (1977) concept of "the death of the author" supported Derrida's assertion that the meanings of texts are not solely determined by the author, but can be interpreted in multiple ways by different readers. This sharp divide between the author and the text was implicitly clear since 1940s, when the *New Criticism* emerged as a critical theory (Gallagher, 1997). There is a certain relationship between the ideas of Derrida and Barthes and those of New Criticism theorists who advocate for "close reading" as a means of constructing the meaning of a text. The notion 'text nexus meaning' as introduced by Derrida, Barthes and others has shocked the established Western thought. It deconstructed the modernist viewpoint that is founded on notions like reason, liberty, equality, and so forth. However, Derrida himself emphasized that deconstruction should not be perceived as something that destroys everything.

Contrary to the above notions, proponents of biographical criticism, a literary criticism which emerged earlier than postmodern theories, advocate the importance of the author's intent in the process of interpreting a literary text. They argue for the author's undeniable role in composing or arranging words as they appear in the text, and according to them, the writing process does not happen in a vacuum but in a certain socio-political context that the author himself is aware of. In reference to this, Davies (2006, p. 2) suggests that texts get their identity from the circumstances of their creation, including the authorship details. A good understanding of a text is thus realized by interpreting evidences in the literary text from different perspectives (Combrink, 1984; Mazaeva & Aydarova, 2017).

The aim of this study is to interpret the postmodern thoughts entertained in Dawit's novel, *Alämānor* (2017). The author of the novel, Dawit Wondimagegn, is an associate professor of psychiatry at Addis Ababa University. As a second career, he has established himself as a writer, having published two novels and a collection of poems in Amharic. His first novel, *Alämānor*, was widely accepted by the public after its initial publication. It has already had over 12 reprints. The novel delves into ontological philosophies by examining how individuals mentally perceive their social environment. It explores existentialism and entertains postmodern ideas that challenge modernist notions of truth, rationality, meaning, and the self. Accordingly, *Alämānor* delves into postmodern philosophical concepts that deconstruct established worldviews prevalent in today's Ethiopia.

Amharic novel writing has earned a reputation for its prominent role in criticizing the sociopolitical systems of different periods. In relation to this, we can note novels such as Hadis's *Fiqir Eskämäqabir* (1965), Dagnachew's *Adäfräs* (1970) and Abe's *Aliwälädim* (1963) which resist the then normative discourses. For example, *Fiqir Eskämäqabir* attempts to deconstruct the established class differences in the Ethiopian social system (Fikre, 1983; Molla, 2008). Teklu (1983) argues that *Adäfräs*, like others, opposed the Ethiopian traditional ways and advocates for revolution against the old system. In addition, Abe's *Aliwälädim* criticizes the social, economic, and political systems of the imperial regime.

This study examines the novel *Alämänor* using post-modern thoughts. In the introductory part, the author declares: “ይህ መጽሐፍ አለማ አድርጎ የተነሳው የተለመደውንና እውነት የሚመስለውን ሁሉ በመጠየቅ ማፍረስ ነው።” (The novel aims at deconstructing everything that seems normal and objectively true through questioning) (Dawit, 2017, n.p). This statement hints about what the author yearns to address in the novel about the contemporary Ethiopia. As stated elsewhere, the author of the novel is a psychiatrist. In addition, he is a frequent guest on television and radio programmes, where he discusses social issues in Ethiopia.

## **Analysis and discussion**

### **Synopsis of the novel**

The story of the novel begins with a classroom discussion of Desta [a medical doctor at Black Lion Medical School] and his students on ontological thoughts, which seem beyond his students' comprehension. Desta often spends his free time with his colleagues, Kibru and Wubit, and a lawyer named Seble, who later became his fiancé, chatting about different philosophical issues that inspire them to spend more time with him.

Desta questions his students, friends, colleagues and even himself about issues that are often taken for granted by many of us and leaves the questions with no explanations. Desta's ways of perceiving the world deviates from the worldviews of people around him. However, his thoughts, initially confusing for many of his companions, have eventually the power to convince them.

Once, while he was driving, a car accident was happened to him and he was admitted to the hospital where he works. Consequently, his friends, colleagues and other people visited him. Learning from his own personal experience, Desta, criticizes some normative conversations made between patients and visitors. Desta and Kibru, with distinct personalities, are intimate friends. Kibru always mocks at Desta's thoughts and ways of reactions to issues raised during conversations.

Through Kibru and Ayida, the novel deals with how ways of one's upbringing determines his/her later age personalities. Kibru is a person with a self-assured, conservative and overconfident personality. Ayida, on the other hand, is described as shy, silent and submissive. Two varied family conditions in which they grew up caused them to establish contrary worldviews. For Kibru, a failure to accomplish something is a death sentence; whereas it is unthinkable for Ayida to engaging in discussions and asking questions.

Kibru and Wubit are characters with unlike worldview; While Kibru is a person with rigid personality, Wubit is flexible, free, and easy-going. However, the story tells that they later become soul mates. Due to the tragic incident happened to his late wife, Kibru almost goes crazy when he learns that Wubit is pregnant.

Desta was also charged for knocking down a person. Wubit introduced him with Seble, a lawyer, who can help him defending during court hearings. Desta, at last, was sentenced for two years and was sent to prison where he enjoys freedom. The end of the story is about the tragic death of Desta from brain bleeding caused by the car accident.

### **Definitive explanation: The impossible attempt**

Postmodernism is characterized by a significant amount of skepticism and questioning of reason. It is understood as a deconstructive activity whereby the root metaphysical prejudice is put-into-question. It puts forward self-identical concepts outside and above the disseminating play of language (Rose, 1991). The lack of a universal and definitive explanation is because such a claim depends on the perspective from which the explanation is provided. Put differently, there is a suspicion of the feasibility of objectively explaining and describing the ever-evolving and dynamic world.

*Alämānor* is full of questions, but the narrator and characters do not give all the answers. The several questions posited in the novel give the chance for readers to fully engage in the reading process and create their own truth. Let's see the following self-identity questions, which are left with no explanation. “ግን እኔ ማነኝ?” (Who am I?); “ምንድነኝ?” (What am I?) (p. 10). The main character, Desta, engages in self-interrogation by raising epistemological and metaphysical inquiries. The postmodern self is an insecure entity with multiple identities influenced by different cultures and histories. Therefore, the search for a complete being is impossible as it is decentered and dispersed into a never ending symbolic system (Hill, 1996). As postmodernists argue, understanding "the self" is difficult due to its complexity and ever-changing nature. In the novel, the main character asks deep questions about his own identity but does not provide any explanations.

This is because the concept of "the self" is elusive, fragmented, and impossible to define in the postmodern sense.

Scholars like Erikson have attempted to elaborate the lifetime development of personal identity. The definition of identity varies across the disciplines of social sciences and humanities. It can be defined from the perspectives of racial, ethnic, spiritual, professional, social class and other backgrounds. However, identity remains one of the most intricate and elusive subjects, as noted by Fearon (1999). In the current sociopolitical context of Ethiopia, people tend to define and identify themselves in terms of their ethnicity and religion. These two attributes have increasingly become the most important self-identifying elements. However, given the unstable and elusive nature of self-identity, attempting to define oneself in certain respects seems impossible. Existentialists like Heidegger, Sartre, and others hold the belief that man lacks a predetermined essence (Mishra, 2021). Man, as an "existent", is unfinished creature and this is what all existentialists agree with. The debates among existentialists revolved around man's transcendence to what destination? In this sense, Kierkegaard argues man transcends towards 'God' (Stewart, 2011) whereas Nietzsche, Sartre and others argue man transcends towards 'nothingness' (Sartre, 2022; Nietzsche, 2002).

Here are two more metaphysical questions of the protagonist that show sense of skepticism – a postmodernist thought. “ሞገስ ምንድነው?” (What is to be born?) (p. 92). “ሞት ምንድነው?” (What is death?) (p. 94). It is only in the spiritual world, people claim that the universal conception related to being and existence is evident, as stated in "*The law of the Lord is perfect...*" (Psalm 19:7). In the postmodern sense, the notion of absolute truth is conceived as a social construction, and hence cannot be attained (Nietzsche, 1979; Hicks, 2004; Nicol, 2009). It is inherent in human nature for the mind to strive for absolute truth. The inability to do so, therefore, results in the meaninglessness of life and thus leads to searching for deeper truths. That, consequently, results in a suspension of judgment on transcendental thoughts. Modernists, on the other hand, contend that the postmodernists' repudiation of absolute truth embodies a nihilistic perspective in which irrationality supplants absurdity.

The subject of being born and death, for example, can be discussed from different perspectives. Death is the defining factor of individual identity and the key to understanding the true essence of human existence (Heidegger, 1977). The postmodernist analysis of death by Derrida, Heidegger, and others is primarily contingent upon cultural and historical contexts (Kovacs, 2002), causing the perception of death to differ based on traditional and historical connections to the subject of death. One may provide an explanation on the topic of death within his

or her cultural context, but achieving complete comprehension of it appears unimaginable.

Multiple religious narratives propose that we existed as spiritual entities, conceived within the womb of another, and transitioned into the perceivable and natural realm as physical beings (Stone, 2019). The soul, originally separate, becomes encapsulated within a specific body in the womb. This is a simple fact that we all comprehend, yet the inexplicable query arises - what is being born? This is the question of existentialism that remains largely unexplainable. The book *Alämānor* presents a constructivist worldview where readers can create their own understanding of facts instead of simply discovering them. With the exception of religious doctrines, which offer definitive answers to questions of existence, metaphysics lacked the ability to provide any definitive answers to these queries.

### **The multiplicity of meaning**

Truth is sometimes perceived as absolute and synonymous with God that “በእግዚአብሔር!” [I swear!] is a common swearword used in day-to-day communication in Ethiopia. However, in the contemporary period, postmodern thought has emerged as the antithesis of the modernist worldview. As discussed elsewhere, postmodernism denies the notion of objective reality, morality, human nature, reason, language, and social progress. Related to this, Lyotard (1984) states truth is particular to the perception of a society, a group, or an individual. It is not objective because the universe is not mechanistic rather historical and personal phenomena. One of the postmodernist thought that *Alämānor* entertains is the impossibility of ‘objective truth’. In this sense, one should not consume 'objective truth' in its raw form but should examine it. Many postmodern thinkers argue that ‘truth’ is always tinged with bias as it is conditioned by culture, context, history and other related social and personal factors (Foucault, 1977; Lyotard, 1984; Hicks, 2004).

Derrida (1976) rejects objective truth. He insists apparent realities are only social constructs and they are not static but subject to change. Truth is relative to the context, group, or individual’s perception. The postmodern subject is no longer his or her own ruler able to view the world objectively. The objectivist approach of viewing the world is clear only if the statement is found out by the objective world like “the car parked near the bank”. Subjective explanations on abstract concepts lack absolute truth as they are influenced by the individual's worldview. Postmodern thought believes that language plays an important role as mutual mentality and thought of human expressed and formed by language. According to Kecskes (2008, p.385), interlocutors construct meaning through the interaction of

their prior and current experience. The interpretation of text is facilitated by recognizing the meaning of lexical words, which is taken as prior knowledge. Meaning can also be created on the spot “in the actual situational context in which communication takes place”. Therefore, it is not only the meanings of the lexical items that determines the meanings of texts but also the actual situational context that contributes for the production of meaning.

We are told in the story that the protagonist (Desta) was sentenced for two years after being found a convict of a car accident. After the adjudication, Desta was just chatting with a man (actually one of the judges) and Seble (his intimate friend) about the case. Meanwhile, Desta utters the following. “ሁለት አመት ታሰርኩ ማለት እኮ ለሁለት ዓመት ነፃ ወጣሁ ማለት ነው።” (I get imprisoned for two years implies I’m set free for two years) (p. 312). One seldom understands the meaning of the above statement using the prior experience he/she has on the lexical items: “imprisoned” and “set free”. The items, being antonyms in their dictionary meaning, are rather presented as synonymous to one another. In this sense, the semantic value “imprisoned” and “set free” depends on the actual context in which the communication takes place.

The elusiveness of meaning, therefore, depends on its context on the spot of the communication. Therefore, meaning and reality from the perspective of postmodernism does not refer absoluteness; it rather denotes unstable, contradictory, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, and fragmented thought. The meanings embedded in the terms “imprisoned” and “set free” as to context of the dialogue are transverse opposite to their literal meanings. Particularly in this contextual notion, the person who is imprisoned feels as if he sets himself free. The person who tells the story seems dissatisfied with life in the social world, viewing it as a prison. Hence, when this person is put in actual prison, he would experience a sense of relative freedom. Thus, the meaning of language transcends mere verbal expression and encompasses the contextual framework within which words are employed.

The following extract further illustrates how perspective matters to make meaning related to something. “አሁን እንኳን ተመስገን ነው። ያዙኝ አልያዙኝ ብዬ መጨነቅ ትቻለሁ።” (It is good now. I gave up worrying about being arrested) (p. 343). The story in the novel tells that the narrator is put in prison for criminal acts of engaging in robbery, and he expresses his inner feelings about how being a prisoner is by far better than living in the social world as to his own perspective. He feels a better sense of freedom in the prison because nobody chases him whenever something is reported lost.

In similar vein, the following extract from the novel, which particularly deals with justice and health, depicts how truth varies as to various contexts, perceptions and worldviews. “ፍትህ የሚጨበጥ ነገር የይደለም። ፍትህ አንፃራዊ መሆን አለበት። [...] ጤናም እንደዚሁ የሚጨበጥ ነገር አይደለም።” (Justice is elusive. It must be relative. [...] Health is elusive as well) (p. 169). The narrator here hesitates to give a definitive meaning of what justice is. Accordingly, definition or explanation of something depends on the perspective of the person who defines or explains it, and if one dares to define or explain – that is a prejudiced definition or explanation. Justice and health are here depicted as mysterious. In relation to this, Derrida’s criticizes justice as “messianic” something which is expected to come, happen, be realized in the future- in the unknowable time to come (Prewitt-Davis, 2013). He attempted to associate it with the theological teaching ‘Jesus will come to serve justice for the oppressed’ – a messianic promise, which makes “justice” elusive for the oppressed.

### **Obedience to social norms at the expense of the inner self**

Social norms have great places in guiding one’s behaviors, actions, and ways of life in the public world. Since social norms are “expectations about appropriate behavior that occurs in group contexts” (McDonald & Crandall, 2015, p. 147), people ought to conduct themselves and reside in line with those norms and conventions, and violating the norms is regarded as wrongdoing, immoral, unacceptable, and generally a social deviance. Sometimes, people go against their own needs to follow social norms. The issue lies in the fact that deviating from social norms results in decline in social status or being excluded from the social environment, and norms in such instances are perceived as social penalties against individuals' needs.

It seems that Dawit’s *Alämānor* is a social criticism - a protest against some established social norms and conventions. Thoughts of the protagonist appear to be reactions to the pressures exerted from the external normative world. In this sense, the thoughts of the protagonist, generally emblemizes the postmodern non-normative worldviews. The novel opens the door to postmodern perspectives. It also reflects how norms, perceptions and beliefs in a society and institution determine the thoughts, activities and behaviors of individuals. According to Best and Kellner (2008), individuals are coerced by predetermined discursive conditions, specifically the episteme, to remain confined in the realm of epistemic thought, disregarding their internal feelings.

Disobeying the norms that affect one’s spontaneity and inner feelings is a deconstructive move against the constructed social system. The novel explores the



idea that norms are socially constructed systems based on mythical, cultural, or religious narratives that neglect individual interests. Therefore, obeying such norms appears to be against individuals' free will. In relation to the notion stated above, we can raise the idea of feeling embarrassed – being the captive of norms that are often against one's inner being. Experiencing embarrassment is a result of conforming to societal norms and conventions that contradict one's inner desires. It is the inability to say "no"; worrying about what others may think, and consideration of others in one's life. People may behave or act following the needs of their inner beings in public spheres as one's way of life should abide by social conventions in that particular social setting. For instance, traditional normative practices like visiting sick persons are considered as good in the Ethiopian social context. Despite its positive aspects, to maintain harmonious social connections, the novel critiques the tedious dialogues between the visitors and the patient (see p.16).

In line with Kierkegaard's idea, Stewart (2011) states that individuals keep their experience of truth private. Consequently, rational contestation becomes unattainable for individual subjects. In order for this to happen, the individual should undergo a certain conversation which eventually gives him/her a revelatory experience of truth. The novel exposes that the existing collective norms require every member to act and behave unvaryingly. This is because collective norms are against the notion of postmodern worldview that does not tolerate rigidity of social systems. On the contrary, it embraces a multitude of options that cater to individual preferences. In the following quote, the major character speaks of a rigid social system and its impact on individuals in his/her social life. Let's see what the protagonist named Desta says: “ከስሙሰልክ ከሰው ጋር በሰላም ትኖራለህ እምቢኝ ካለክ ደግሞ ትገለገላለህ ፤ በቤትህ ፤ በጎረቤትህ፣ በሙስሪያ ቤትህ፣ በሀገርህ ባዕድ ትሆናለህ፡፡” (You can maintain a harmonious coexistence with others by pretending to adhere to specific behaviours accepted as normal by the community. If you refuse to comply with norms, you will experience isolation in your household, community, workplace, and country) (p. 5). Our tendency to adhere to norms and expectations of the social group to which we are members prevents us from being true to ourselves. The realization of our freedom lies in our willingness to break traditions and social conventions. The statement above from the novel reveals that society urges you to live according to pre-determined social standards. You have two options here; you can either choose to live in accordance with your genuine feelings and face isolation from society, or conform to societal norms and face isolation from your true self.

Habermas (1984) recounts that uncontested religious beliefs in traditional societies contributes for the proliferation of norms that determine personal and social behaviors. People with postmodern worldviews are often driven to express their authentic, unique selves. In response to the objectified, functional, rationalistic modern world, they emphasize on the subjective world. This, however, has some negative consequences for the individual. Obviously, society labels people who do not abide by collective norms as "abnormal". As stated in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), the notion of 'abnormality' and 'normality' is one of the major concerns of Foucault. After getting expert testimonial on legal cases related to crime, he concluded that the involvement of psychiatry in assessing the degree of 'madness' or 'abnormality' of individuals in legal processes has brought about 'abnormality nexus crime' discourse. The discourse of 'abnormality' is thus established against the natural and spontaneous human drive; one who acts, behaves and communicates based on his natural and emotional drive is considered as 'abnormal'.

Foucault (1977) conceived reason and abstract rationalism as prison. He forwarded an assault particularly on reason for it [reason] leads people to dwell in the deliberation of the context of activities and the calculation of their worth or outcome which he believes drive away the feelings, inspirations and spontaneity, all of which are crucial for the inner being. In this respect, the novel divulges how pretending to act against one's inner being is fraudulent for selfhood, as in: "በማስመሰል ከሰዎች ጋር ብትኖርም ለራስህ ግን ባዕድ ነህ።" (Thought you could live with others in disguise, you are alienated from yourself) (p. 5). When one pretends to do something without his/her internal will, he/she is alienated from him/herself. Accordingly, some social norms are referred to as social sanctions - restrictions which are imposed against people's free will.

Similarly, pretentious appearances seem against the intrinsic will of individuals. Contrary to what one internally appears to himself or herself, a person may appear for others superficially. The novel criticizes people in various careers do not really live according to their inner selves. They deceive the society showing their artificial appearance that is against the true self they dwell in. The following extract, Wubit's comment about being superficial, reveals that people pretend to show their superficial selves than their true selves in many sociopolitical contexts (see p. 273). Her criticism of such norms emerges from Kibru's thought regarding the Ethiopian culture. When Wubit arrived at a restaurant where Kibru was waiting for her to have dinner with, she accidentally kissed him on his lips. Meanwhile, the incident shocked Kibru, who tried to justify that engaging in such activities in public goes against Ethiopian tradition. Wubit countered his argument by stating

that neither religion nor culture dictates the location of intimate encounters. She argued that religion and culture, however, restrict people not to make love before marriage. She further told him that “ባህሉን ማክበር ከፈለግህ ቤት ውስጥ መኝታ ላይም ልስትመኝ አይገባም ፤ ምክንያቱም ሚስትህ ስላልሆንኩ።” (If you respect the culture, you are not supposed to kiss me in bedroom as long as I am not your wife) (p. 273). Wubit knows that Kibru would not feel shocked if the incident happened at home. Therefore, according to Wubit, what worried Kibru is not her [Wubit’s] disobedience to the culture; he felt upset because she kissed him in public. Kibru’s loyalty to the Ethiopian culture seems thus superficial. It is based on such a notion that Wubit complains about the superficial appearance of many people in the Ethiopian social and political settings. On the other hand, the novel, through Wubit, deconstructs the cultural and moral principle of the society. Wubit’s claim about moral principle strengthens moral relativism - a postmodernist view which believes that moral judgment is based on a certain point of view which does not work for every one of us; this motivates multiple standpoints and rejects a privileged standpoint on a certain notion.

### **Unmasking the taken for granted**

Traditions offer us commonly accepted frameworks for life. Culture permeates our very essence and appears innate, yet it is an acquired phenomenon. It is through such life orientation that we perceive and judge the world. Upholding postmodern thinking, the novel *Alämānor* appears as subversive to such social orientation. It thus attempts to unmask the taken for granted thought, which is clear in the social system. The following statement criticizes the Ethiopian people as whole – as lacking social consciousness. It attempts to destabilize the conventional way of perception and seeks a kind of change in the way one perceives thoughts imposed by others. “...ባጠቃላይ የእኛ አገር ሰው [...] የተባለውን የሚቀበል ነው። ብዙ አይጠይቅም” (People in our country are submissive and accept what they are told. They take things for granted.) (p. 35). Taking things for granted is accepting everything without questioning or objection. According to Foucault (1977) knowledge [what is believed to be true and what is to be consumed with no questioning] comes from those who have the power. Those in power can enforce their thoughts as unquestionable knowledge. Ethiopians in the political sphere, for instance, are prone to deception and conspiracy. This is predominantly a result of the cultural context in which political elites' rhetoric is either believed or not critically assessed by the wider public (see p. 99). Foucault maintains that the existing forms of knowledge and institutions are constructed through power and

domination and need to be reformed (Foucault, 1980). Similarly *Alämānor* contends that all forms of consciousness are products of social and historical contexts, and therefore should be subjected to scrutiny instead of being accepted unquestioningly.

### **Critique on the metanarratives**

Postmodernism denies metanarratives. The rapid advancement of communication technology<sup>4</sup> in the contemporary world has exposed individuals to an array of narratives, resulting in a propensity to construct postmodern worldviews. Unlike the modernist worldview, which is constructed from grand narrative(s), the postmodern era has brought about various narratives and perspectives. In response to that, people are forced to look deep into those various narratives to discover their own truth (Farhan. 2019). Lyotard (1984, p. 37) in this regard argues that “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or narrative of emancipation.” Therefore, in a period when grand narratives have no space, it is very difficult to give a single explanation that affirms absolute certainty on a given notion. The various narratives form subjective worldviews. The following extract from *Alämānor* reveals notions of various narratives. “ሰው ለመኖር ዓለሙን ይፈጥራል። ዓለም ዘጠኝ ናት የሚሉት ለካስ እውነታቸውን ነው። ግን ከዚያም በላይ ናት። ዓለም ብዙ ናት።” (Man creates his own world. The saying ‘the world counts nine’ seems true, but it is beyond that. The world is countless) (p. 331). This extract implies that there is no universal and absolute worldview that works for every one of us. Thus, each of us holds our own subjective social worldview(s) formulated through our perception and understanding of life.

Human beings are born into an established system that controls the actions, behaviours, and manners of the younger generation. The social system is built on cultural and historical narratives, and people often see it as the reality of society. The novel narrates the situation this way: “በታሪክ በተደራጀው ዓለም ውስጥ መኖር አዲሱ እውነት ይሆናል።” (To live in the historically established world is a new experience) (p. 123). It is already stated that the worldviews we have developed are based on the grand narratives(s). This could be manifested at the societal or

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<sup>4</sup> Lyotard (1984) asserts that due to the advancement of technology, legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different ways. Metanarratives are thus replaced by multiple narratives that eventually establish multiple knowledge, truth, and worldviews.

family level - in that the way one behaves depends on the way he/ she grows up in his/her social environment.

Postmodernists believe that the present is the ideological and discursive construction of the past or what we call the meta[historical] narratives. Our perception and understanding of the present social world is therefore based on those past historical narratives (p. 181). The postmodern thinkers celebrate the dynamic diversity of life; plurality of perspectives, meanings, methods; alternatives of interpretations; and critique of metanarratives, including myths, cultures, nations, professions (Wilson, 1997). The novel validates that our perceptions are influenced by enduring metanarratives, refuting the concept of an absolute reality and exposing the discursive imposition of these narratives on individuals who unquestioningly accept them. Although social realities were once perceived as true, they now appear unreal because of shifts in time and space. This suggests that 'social realities' come from metanarratives, but they rarely show an accurate picture of social realities.

### **The impossibility of the sovereign self**

The postmodern thought about man's inter-subjectivity seems a phenomenon in the Ethiopian traditional culture, as people live inter-dependently in different social affairs. Regarding the matter related to man's inter-relationship, Lyotard (1984, p. 15) states that "[a] self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever". In this sense, various forms of social realities in Ethiopia have been observable in neighborhoods, matrimonial kinships, familial relationships, and the like. In Amharic, there is a proverb which reads "የሰው መድኃኒቱ ሰው ነው" (A man's existence is possible in the existence of another man). This proverb confirms the impossibility of independent subjects in the social world. Related to this notion, the following extract from the novel addresses the same assertion on the impracticality of the sovereign self. It reads: "የሰው መድኃኒቱ ሰው አይደለም?" (Is it not man that makes another man's existence possible?) (p. 332). However, the novel through Wubit addresses the issue related to the eventual disappearance of such rich social capital these days, and stresses on the importance of everyone for every other.

Postmodernists view humans as social animals who need society and its cultures, goals, and values to thrive (Forghani, Keshtiaray & Yousefly, 2015). The basic sense of social connectedness and mutual understanding of the environment emerges at the stage of infancy (Rochat, Passos-Ferreira & Salemn, 2009). Individuals who are raised in the same social environment inevitably develop

interconnected lifestyles that make independent living impossible. After Desta was sentenced for two years for causing a car accident, he was taken to the judge's office. Seble, a well-known attorney at law, was also with him. The three (Desta, the judge and Seble) engaged in a dialogue, and one of the points of their discussion was related to prison. In the middle of their dialogue, Sebele asked Desta, “ታስረህ ታውቃለህ?” (Have you ever been imprisoned?), and he replied in the following way. “መቼ ተፈትኜ አውቃለሁ። ነፍስ ካወቅሁበት ዕድሜ ጀምሮ ከሌሎች ሰዎች ጋር ለመኖር በስንት ገመድ ታስራ ነው እኮ የኖርኩት።” (I have never been set free. For the sake of living with others, I have been tied in chain ever since I remember myself) (p. 312). The above excerpt reveals that the notion of inescapable inter-subjectivity and interconnectedness emerges early on, as young individuals grasp social dynamics. Desta relates being in prison with being in the social system. Human beings join the already established social environment at birth and the mental development of the infant is shaped by what is available. Therefore, one remains in chain with others as he/she cannot escape social life. Related to the same notion, here is another extract “...ሁላችንም የኔ ቢጤዎች ነን። አይደለንም? አንዳችን ከአንዳችን የምንለምን? የምንፈልግ? የምንጠይቅና የምንወስድ” (We all are replica of ourselves, aren't we? We beg, seek, ask and take from each other) (p. 332). According to the statement, individuals are incomplete beings to exist independently. They, therefore, need the presence of others for a complete worldly life implying the impossibility of a sovereign self. The characters in the novel have inter-subjective<sup>5</sup> understanding about the world they live in. Individuals no longer have a clear sense that they have just one identity, rather they perceive themselves as having multiple, overlapping and sometimes contradictory identities. The postmodern culture which is dominated by advanced communication technology and globalization enhances interconnectedness of people (Gergen, 1991). Thus, the interconnection between individuals in the contemporary period is not only possible; it is inevitable.

## Conclusion

Postmodernists reject collective norms, meta-narratives, and objective truth, considering them almost impossible in the postmodern era. From this perspective,

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<sup>5</sup> According to Cooper-White (2014), intersubjectivity, which was firstly coined by Edmund Husserl, refers to the exchange and sharing of both conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings of people. It's most complex usage is related to the postmodern philosophical concept of constructionism.

the novel generally attempts to deconstruct everything that seem apparently real and natural.

The interpretation made on the novel indicated that attempting to give definitive explanation about something is impossible. It establishes the unattainability of precisely defining a particular subject due to its inherent fluidity, variability, and susceptibility to change across different temporal and spatial contexts. The novel underscores the importance of skepticism, particularly when it comes to existential thoughts, suggesting that these thoughts can be perceived differently from various angles. The novel also makes a deconstructive move against the established normative system. Thoughts of the protagonist, for example, appear to be reactions against the pressures exerted from the external normative world. Social norms are sometimes referred to as 'social sanctions' as they do not accommodate the needs of individuals. The urgency of the public world to live as per the social norm thus risks our inner self. The novel urges not to tolerate these norms at the expense of one's spontaneity.

In addition, the advancement of communication technology exposed a person for multiple narratives which in turn affects the credibility and legitimacy of metanarratives. Therefore, people's exposure to various narratives results them to construct their own subjective realities. The novel, similarly, is critical to the existing discursive meta-narratives and depicts the possibility of multiple thoughts, narratives and worlds. The impossibility of the sovereign self in the Ethiopian social system is the other postmodern notion entertained in the novel. Therefore, the novel affirms that interconnectedness of individuals to each other is not a mere possibility but an inevitable social fact.

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