
Mine to Win, 2016, by Hiwot Taffera

Netsanet Gebremichael¹

History in Literature: A Methodological Discussion

A theoretical discussion of literature, popular memory, and history enables us to argue that novels are valid historical sources, pertinent to their role in shaping popular memory and imagination. The employment of memory and imagination is the work of both historians and novelists. Bearing in mind the role of literary texts in the “deployment of popular memory to recompose past events,”² the historian uses novels for their role in crafting collective popular imagination rather than for their accurate historical information. Although not accurate, the novel can provide an insight into the social and cultural aspects of human life. Literary works are not a reliable source of information about past events. However, art forms such as the novel take a historical theme to construct their imaginative story. By refocusing the debate on history in literature from the accuracy of information to the role of literature informing national imagination and popular memory, novels can be sites for shaping popular perception and exploring historical themes. Similarly, the novel *Mine to Win* imaginatively reconstructs a periodized past of the 1850s-1870s, revolving around student life, scholarly traditions of that epoch, and the everyday lives of the community.

Reading *Mine to Win*

By foregrounding agrarian life forms the novel tries to build an everyday picture of 1850s-1870s were like in one part of the country. The author builds her storyline by telling stories around the life of a student, *Taweney*, from his early school years to his adult life tied to his scholarly achievement. Throughout the novel, the narrative of the novel is shaped through conversations that take place among characters. Although this technique enables the reader to enter the psyche of characters and hence the author’s view of the storyline, it underutilizes the imagination of the reader through

¹ PhD, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, AAU: netsanet.gebremichael@aau.edu.et

² Mbye Cham. 1993. *Official History, Popular memory: Reconfiguration of African’s past in the film of African Past*. p. 21

plot, character, and thematic suspense. Everything in this novel is over, defined, explained, and analyzed. This, in turn, creates confusion in the reader as to whether the book I am reading is a novel or a historical analysis of some sort. Perhaps the underutilization of literary techniques to construct the novel as a literary enterprise is the major weakness of this novel. This is mainly because, above everything else, a novel is a creative writing. Historical analysis, real or imagined, is only used to enhance the creative formation of a novel and or to make a historical argument using literary intervention.

The Author- Hiwot Teffera is also known for the highly acclaimed memoir *Tower in the Sky*, published in 2014, which was widely read in English among urban elites and the Ethiopian diaspora. Later, the memoir was translated into Amharic in 2015. *Mine to win*, like her former book, is written in the English language. Perhaps, the author's use of the English language to write a novel that deals with pre-1900 has a surreal quality, mainly because the novel seems to try and create a feeling of regret for having lost the knowledge embedded in Amharic Qene tradition and the ancient language of Geez. Beyond this, the novel seems to embody another layer of irony that resides between the content of the story, that set solely in the agrarian past, and the use of the English language in the contemporary time of 2016 to express this agrarian past. Although the translatability of social and cultural phenomena of 1850-1870s into the English language is possible, it does so at the risk of its targeted audience. The assumed reader of *Mine to Win* is therefore unavoidably a minute section of the urban elite who can read and write in English, and foreigners. Although there is nothing wrong with writing the novel for an outside audience and the English reading section of literary readers at home, the irony resides in what seems to be the major intervention of the novel's attempts to make, to generate feelings of regret over a dying tradition of Qene and Geez language. It is perhaps less probable to create the intended sense of regret and expect impact among Anglophone readers. Perhaps an intense sense of regret could be expected among readers who traverse a multilingual linguistic landscape of English, Amharic, and Ge'ez languages, and scholarly traditions. The novels employ a blend of fiction and history to create a sense of what was there and what is on the verge of extinction.

To this effect, the acknowledgement page provides lists of names with authors' notes of gratitude. Specifically, in page numbers between v-vii, Hiwot Tefera (the author) introduces the broader and specific assistance she has received; the author indicated that she has done research in the course of developing the manuscript. The author describes that she has traveled to

some of the sites in the Novel, consulted historical sources, and conducted interviews. Therefore, the information provided by the author in the pages of the acknowledgement can be one of the grounds for a reader to take *Mine to win* under the genre of Historical Novel. However, the author does not offer any information on the cover page as to whether *Mine to Win* is a novel or a historical novel. The novel is heavily preoccupied with historical anecdotes of the late 19th century, and offers an interpretation of historical events such as the Boru Meda moment. Yet because there is no overt statement on the genre of this novel, we tend to take it as history history-laden work of fiction.

Reading the novel *Mine to Win*, one is confronted with the need to understand what historical analysis helps the novelist to do. In other words, what is the role of historical analysis, real or imagined? Layers of historical narratives are intermingled with the construction of supposedly fictional characters. The circular plot of the storyline spins only to tie the beginning of the story to its ending. What is presented as the vision in the beginning of the novel, the return of Taweney to his home village after he has become a scholar, ties to the ending plot of the novel. In so doing, the novel seems to trace a full circle story plot. To achieve this, we encounter fewer and fewer dramatic plots that keep the reader in suspense; rather, the story is read as one listens to an autobiographical oral account that is built around cause and effect or first and next chronology. This is perhaps because the novel emulates a historical line of presentation that orders time and change through chronologies rather than creative intervention of tension, conflict, suspense, and climax. Perhaps, the author has inclined to show the historical argument of the novel in the contemporary urban context.

Consequently, the novel seems to confront urban readers with two peripheral themes in contemporary urban life. Rural- agrarian life forms and Qene as a sophisticated form of scholarly and intellectual tradition. By way of commemorating these two life forms, the novel reminds urban readers about two fading topics in contemporary Addis Ababa. *Mine to Win* not only shifts the landscape of narrative from the city but also shifts the time to the late 19th century. By setting the novel in late 19th-century rural Ethiopia, the author recounts and reconnects urban readers to distant places and times. From the vantage point of a contemporary reader in Addis Ababa, the novel reads as rural nostalgia. However, the novel is situated to tell a conflicting and complementary relationship between village life and life in Qene Scholarly traditions. The image of a shepherd–learner is central to illuminate the

conflicting and collaborative aspects of “people of the plow” and people of Qene schools in a rural setting.

“Your Life is tied to the land, not to school.”³

Hiwot Tefera, in *Mine to Win*, represents conflicting but conforming relations between the life of the “land” and the life of school. The pursuit to be a learned man, as a vision of life, is considered a threat to farmers who require labor to cultivate the land. The life of school, on the other hand, seeks leave of absence from farming and the vocation of herding cattle for sons of farmers to join *Qolo Tamari* schools. However, schools are heavily dependent on neighboring farmers to sustain daily meals for the lives of students and teachers. One of the processes through which the sons of farmers resolve this tension is presented in the novel through the act of escape or “running away” from their villages to join school elsewhere. Escape is thus discussed as a transitory phase that facilitates the learner’s journey from the vocation of being a shepherd to becoming a learner and then a scholar.

The farmer’s household is portrayed in the novel as constituted of not only a unitary nuclear family but also interconnected to other families through relations of labor that extend to forming a village community in a place called Nech Gedel. The community is interconnected through labor ritual during harvest season, in times of feast, and in memorial services. A child is therefore needed not only from his immediate parents but also from his immediate village community (*Mine to Win*, 1-7). It is based on such kinds of material needs that a child is seen as a helper and part of the labor support system to his immediate family members, and occasional labor service is required in his village.⁴

The child is also framed as the future caretaker of the ancestral land. Tawaney’s father, Ato Abeje, announces, “Your life is tied to the land, not to school.” Tawaney’s desire to go to school is confronted with his father’s vision about his life to inherit the land. The “Runaway” children are faced with challenges both from their household and from other members of their neighboring villages. Boys who had to travel on their own were suspected of escape, and were often discouraged by different people on the road: traders,

³ Ato Abeje’s reminder to Tawaney, *Mine to Win*, 1.

⁴ “You are a good son and we know you will see us through old age” (*Mine to Win*, 16).

priests, and mundane travelers discouraged them not to escaping for school. This part of the novel illuminates that coming of age for that community is to defy all resistance and pave their individual, pair, or group way to join school. Escape was the only route to a life of learning. (Mine to Win, 11-18)

Runaway boys symbolize competing visions of rural life. The dilemma was between the need to be tied to the land and to escape it. The author paints of rural life as shaped by these competing intergenerational visions of the future. Perhaps it is through these tensions that the author manages to construct villages as non-homogeneous sites of farming communities. Rather, a village is comprised of different classes of peasants, landless craft workers, students, liturgy, priests, village scholars, and landowners with tenants. However, the author seems to escape other categories and institutions such as slaves, soldiers, war, and trade. Although it's a creative piece of writing, not mentioning or omitting the period, which is known for its political upheavals and intense level of slave trade, tends to selectively remember and reconstitute this era, perhaps less critically. As a novel that commemorates certain aspects of servitude social it silences other forms of labor relations, such as household slavery.

The tension between those who work on the land and those who seek wisdom and knowledge through reading, reciting, writing, translating, and composing Qene seems to produce another class of people- learned men in villages. The son of a farmer creates himself as a learned man through his rebellion, not being "tied to the land". The novel illustrates revolt against farmers' vision of the future, creates a new subject, the learner, and later the scholar. A scholar in this setting is therefore the product of a revolt that has an intergenerational route of escape from the land to school.

Tawaney, the major character, draws his inspiration to become a man of knowledge from his uncle Awoke. His uncle saw the seed of a new vision in Tawaney's mind. The young boy is provided with the possibilities of imagining another life that is not tied to the land through his uncle. Tawaney, as a younger generation, makes his observation by comparing his uncle to his father:

Father was very much a son of the earth. That day, I noticed that his hands were rough and calloused and his fingernails soiled. I saw him in my mind's eye coming home from the field, carrying a staff, sweaty, with dirty cloth sloppily wrapped around his head. I was almost

ashamed of having him as a father. Uncle's hand was smoother and I could tell that he had never pushed a plow or held a pick. He spoke with an air of authority and ease, unlike his father, who spoke as though he was unsure of himself and at times self-deprecatingly... I needed nobody to tell me the stark difference between the brothers was education. I do not want to be like my father. I will go to school and become like my uncle, I vowed. (*Mine to win*:21).

Tawaney emerges as an internal critique of his father's ways of being. He gains a perspective of an outsider by comparing his father with his uncle Awoke. Tewanaye's comparison leads him to rebel against his father's way of life. He further receives a new mantra, not that of the land but of knowledge. His uncle announces to him, "Qene, like everything else, is yours to win." Tewaney extends that and affirms, "Mine to win!"⁵ Here, beyond the comparison made about two individuals, the analysis in the novel can be extended to a comparison of occupations. The agrarian vision of life is tied to the land, with a vision to protect ancestral land, cultivate the land, and sustain one's own family life and pass it to the next generation.

"Awoke, you cannot live without the land" ... "The Earth is what gives life. It nourishes us. I respect the land that enables me to feed my family. My ancestors kept it for us, and I want to keep it for my son and my grandchildren (*Mine to Win*, 24).

Therefore, the above observation makes it clear that land-based social relations have the notion of past, present, and future linked to the responsibility to cultivate the land. The land that is inherited from ancestors is meant to be preserved, used to reproduce one's own life, and passed to future generations. This is the vision of a land based on agrarian conditions of life. This privilege is not for everyone. Some sections of society are excluded from land ownership. The life of landlessness makes another individual assume a different occupation. Therefore, the past-present and future order of time is specific to the landowner who foresees a certain kind of future that continues from the past based on the materiality of land. The landless have less claim on the past, the present, and the future.

...mother gave me ...the new clothes that Ahmed, the only weaver in Nech Gedel, has made for me. A Muslim man, Ahmed, lived on one

⁵ *Mine to Win*, 27.

corner of Nech Gedel and had no plot since land was inherited from ancestors (Mine to Win, 69).

It is in this sense that the heterogeneity of rural life in this novel, which depicts life as that which is constituted by multiple layers of conflicting social relations, tries to illustrate the village more as a site of interconnection and disconnection. Although the novel recovers the rural livelihood as a central social, geographic unit of analysis to build its storyline of the novel the contemporary urban reader is invited to consider rural reality with diverse social categories. However, this estrangement is bridged in the novel through the theme of interdependence. It seems to me that those who escape from their ancestral land and the landless remain dependent on those who cultivate the land for their daily subsistence.

School life would have been unthinkable without the kindness of the village folks. Their generosity made our lives easier. They were loyal to the school. They loved and respected us...no one held back when a student invoked the name of God, St Mary, or a saint. Women rushed to bring us a slice of injera with sauce or a snippet of salt dusted on it. They saved us injera, bread, and Tella during the feast...they believed we were doing God's work and they took it as their duty to support us (Mine to Win, 89).

It is made apparent in the novel that the school-centered lifestyle won't sustain itself without food offerings from nearby villagers. The life of subsistence meets the life of learning in winning daily food. In this sense, schools were a dependent institution; schools could only strive to seek knowledge and wisdom within the institution of maintaining, cultivating, and producing from the land. Sections like this reveal the intertwined nature of the life of subsistence and the life of learning through food. This tension between farmers' view of life and the vision of the learned man leads to their coexistence in a conflicting and interdependent manner. Although the novel is set to clarify the late 19th century, land-based social relations were where people lived in villages and ploughed their land. This novel written in the contemporary Ethiopia, published in 2016, on the backdrop of large land based protest in 2015, in the context of urban gentrification, absorbing of rural land around the capital and large scale agriculture that uses rural land, perhaps help us pose the centrality of land question in the social, economic and political configuration of both of the rural and urban past – present. Therefore, perhaps the novel could be read as a form of land-centered

practice and imagination in the past. Which helps to reiterate that new inscriptions on land-based social relations, be it in rural or urban landscape, face resistance not only from the materiality of land for self-reproduction but also for its historical value. Thus, land continues to be the site of social and political transformation in a given locale. In the novel, it's the role of the scholar to object accumulative tendencies of land and wealth by a few. However, the novel approaches the rural social relations on its own right by showing its disaggregated features rather than as a static and antithetical of the urban. The centrality of rural social and geographic landscape reconstructs the urban as the periphery only as a site of reading the rural. The use of the English language to describe the rural past in the novel makes the rural life form a strange site for reconstructing the rural interior through a strange language, the social and historical context it describes. In this sense, the author uses her artistic right to create an English-speaking rural life in Northern Ethiopia. Yet the language of the novel, like the scholarly traditions it attends to, seems to employ a double meaning to offer criticism to younger generations of scholars through exposing their zeal for wealth rather than wisdom. In so doing, it builds another layer of generational tension to add complexities and dynamism to the rural-centric Qene scholarly traditions through the notion of changing values in generations.

Echoing the question, what is the role of the intellectual? The novel raises the complacent attributes of scholars towards the few wealthy individuals. The notion of integrity is raised as a moral pathology of younger intellectuals who do not resist the accumulation of wealth by the few; rather, they have the tendency to submit to too few wealthy individuals for their daily subsistence. These are those who do not speak truth to power, as the author suggests through one of the older scholars,

Berhan disliked such occasions but had nothing but disdain for people like Kegnazmach [the massive land owner in the village], whom he thought was pretentious... [the feast and festivity] ...was an occasion for the landowner to parade his wealth by the amount of food and drinks served. Berhan was even more dismayed by the performance of his colleagues for debasing qene as praise poetry, saying things that they did not mean... it is immoral to say yes to what you do not believe in. people make rules and want others to follow them...rules are not God given we can change them I respect the rules only in as far as they serve us all, not just few. You know, we had so many lay

people and clergy who were exemplary. These days, I find it difficult to find people of integrity (Mine to Win, 136-141).

Through creating a dialogue between respected scholar of Qene, Liqe Birhan, and his student Tawny, the author seems to present her historical argument about the notion of decline and its remedies. The present is characterized as a site of decline due to the lack of rigorous intellectual exercise and lack of scholarly integrity. The Qene scholar, Liqe Birhan, passionately depicts an honorable display of scholarly excellence in the past. In contrast, the present lacks both rigor and personal integrity. The role of submissive intellectuals to people of authority and the wealthy is the very condition of decline. Learned men are supposed to be accountable to pursue “knowledge and wisdom” and remain solely accountable to the scholarly communities rather than being subservient to people of authority and wealth (Mine to Win: 142-143). The only remedy to this decline is rigor, diligence, and seeking knowledge and wisdom for its own sake. This is the way out of mediocrity. However, the author seems to designate the notion of integrity as a pure moral crisis that has its remedies through upright moral revival. The process that has led the scholar to be subservient to those in authority perhaps also requires economic remedy to the decline in “integrity” not a moral one. Because the designation of integrity as purely moral phenomena portrays the intellectual as an entity who resides outside of everyday conditions of lives they are “either gods or beasts”.

The author achieves the way out of this crisis through instructional moral voices from older generations of scholars. The didactic voice throughout the novel appears as a strategy used to establish a nearly truthful type of effect, and thus, the reader is confronted with a preacher. In so doing, the novel presents the question of integrity solely as the question of generation and of moral decline. Furthermore, this line of argument extends to depict the present as a moment of crisis and thus a moment of moral decline.

In this novel, the past is depicted as a site of redemption. Some sections of the past have redeeming possibilities for today’s ills. This, in turn, undermines to acknowledgment of the contemporary aspect of the present. For example, the *Novel Mine to Win* is a novel set in late 19th-century rural life, but is simultaneously written in English for contemporary readers in 2016. Therefore, the novel is primarily a creative piece in 2016 than the time it aims to reconstruct through the novel. Hence, if the novel is to be analyzed as a literary piece of its time it will be mainly compared to novels such as

Deliverance: A tale of Colliding Passion and the Muse of Forgiveness, A historical Novel by Bereket Habte Selassie, 2016, written also in English, not with English novels earlier periods but with its contemporaries. The present also has its newness, changes, and peculiarities that have to be carefully documented and engaged. Perhaps the present is not always a site of crisis and overcoming through the past, but also a site of creativity on its own right, such as the production of the novel *Mine to Win*. One of how the novel honors the past is through celebrating the novel; thus, although the idea of the present is painted as a crisis, the novel also achieves this depiction by celebrating the far past. Therefore, the present inhabits both crisis and commemoration.

The Novel as a Site of Memorial

The novel sets a celebratory tone for schools in Qene in contemporary times. In so doing, the novel situates the novel itself as a site of memorial to celebrate, commemorate, and instruct what is to learn from the past. This is achieved through active retelling and analysis of a quixotic aspect of the past that the author seems to develop as a technique of narrative.

In this analysis, the author literary and symbolically sets the novel in the past. Literally because the novel is set to tell the story⁶ of a sharp, student, scholar, and a chronicler who had lived between 1857-1879, symbolically because the author seems to depict Qene schools and their social world as practices of the past. The author further seems to suggest that some aspects of the past need to be evoked and put to use for the present. Perhaps also because it faces the threat of being forgotten, thus the way to keep it alive is to commemorate this aspect of the past through the novel.

... Uncle Awoke insisted on calling me Tewaney after a reputable Qene Liq named Taweney of the Gojam... By naming me thus, he had entrusted me with the responsibility to live up to my namesake...Quite often, I wondered if this meant becoming a Qene Liq. I wondered what kind of a man this Tawney was and if I could ever become like him (*Mine to Win*, 6).

The ten-year-old protagonist Tawaney is made to account for the past, his present, and the uncertain future that awaits him. The narrator not only tells us about the origin of his name, but also analyzes what his uncle intends to do in

⁶ This phrase is borrowed from Yukunno Amlack Mezigebe in an informal conversation about the novel in mid-March 2017.

naming him after a respected qene liq. A ten-year-old character provides a discourse on what naming is to serve in linking past-present; future makes this line of the story improbable. Rather, such a visionary beginning could be used by the author to commemorate the name of the respected Qene scholar from the past in the present year 2016. The novel highlights the need to revere not only Qene scholars from the past like Tawney but also the intellectual tradition itself.

“...Qene is the foundation of knowledge. It is through Qene that knowledge has been transmitted from one generation to the next. There is a wealth of knowledge in Qene that you should want to study. Study Qene, composed by Liqawint, and you will see how much knowledge and wisdom are hidden in those beautiful but hard-to-understand poems. Our fathers have entrusted us with this great tradition. We have to honor it.”(Mine to Win:131).

Here, the author seems to explain why we may need to celebrate such traditions and make them lively in the present. Qene, being the source of knowledge just like the land, is a heritage that has been passed from one generation to another. Perhaps the present generation, who could be reading this novel, needs to invest in studying Qene. In so doing, a given generation would play its role in preserving the intellectual wealth of the past and “honor” it. This argument of the novel would have been more forceful if the language was Amharic⁷, both in terms of wide readership coverage and internal consistency of its own argument by centering the language of Qene. One use of this memorialization is not to lose or forget these age-old traditions. The novel is like a wake-up call and initiation of regret in order to redeem.

Memorialize not to Forget:

Referring to the violent outcomes in the aftermath of the sectarian debates held in Boru media, the author reflects that these debates indeed are not new to the 1870s but have their antecedent, so do present-time sectarian or inter-religious debates.

...Debates were held peacefully. But we have seen violent times such as the bloodshed that occurred during Susenyo’s regime, who once

⁷Please note that later the novel was translated into Amharic, entitled HASESSA by Hiwot Tadesse.

ruled Qibat as official doctrine, and earlier the Deqie Estifanos, who believed less in the institution of the church and more in personal relationship with God and Christ, and who did not accept the veneration of Mary. The foreign missionaries pretend they are teaching us about these things, but our people have debated these issues thirty years before their church split (*Mine to Win*: 184).

In the above deliberation, we observe that a narrator who is set in the context of the 1870s suddenly analyses a more contemporary history of evangelical movements in Ethiopia. It seems to me that the author perhaps collapses the period of the 1870s to popular debates of contemporary relevance to make an argument about the present. One of the drawbacks of not knowing one's past is considering the old as new. Debate is one of the institutional practices that highlights the past had indeed had heterogeneous views about its own present religious and political views. Differences of views produce fierce debates and have violent outcomes as well.

Hiwot Teffera seems to suggest to the contemporary generation which one to inherit.

What happened after Boru Meda against Muslims and the massacre committed by Gagn Mohammed ...all that was brutal and inexcusable. It is interesting when you go to Metsihaf Bet and learn Andmeta. There is room for tolerance because Andemta, by its nature, allows or entertains various interpretations of texts as long as they are not considered heretical (*Mine to Win*, 184).

The past is depicted both as a site of ills and of remedies. The author locates the practice of Andemta from the Metsihaf Bet that involves the practice of offering multiple interpretations to a religious text, - praxis of Andemta as a source for the practice and history of tolerance. This practice is described as that which recognizes and allows multiple ways of understanding and assigning meaning to sacred text. The possibility embedded in the practice of Andemta, therefore, could signify a methodology of allowing multiple visions over a reality without necessarily reverting to using means of force to silence or annihilate different views and practices. The author seems to suggest that the vision of Andemta as an intellectual practice can be transposed to cultivate a more allowing social and political space in the present over matters of competing visions in the present. One ought to know one's past not only to be embrace old wisdom anew, but also to cultivate more accepting practices

towards difference. The praxis of Andemita permits a vision of heterogeneity instead of establishing a win or lose approach to silence different voices of an era. It encourages the use of scholarly debates over the use of violence to settle differences of views. Hence, the novel invites the reader to unearth and study the mechanisms through which these scholarly debating traditions were formed and preserved.

Orality and the Written Text: Writing as an Act of Not Forgetting

Tewaney, read the commentaries our liqawint have written and try to learn from their Qene. They have translated books and manuscripts from Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew. I will give you a book with a collection of philosophers' sayings translated from these languages into Ge'ez... but many of the manuscripts have been burnt by Gragn Mohammed. Still others have been stolen by foreign travellers. Tedrows II killed many and burned churches in Gondar and removed manuscripts. When he committed suicide at Maqdela, the English stole these collections and took them away. That hurts... I felt that I was drawing deeply from a well of knowledge and wisdom (*Mine to Win: 190*).

The above note is delivered orally as a line of conversation. The character Liq Birhan delivers this amount of historical and scholarly information orally. Yet the irony in these lines is that the character discusses books that have survived several extinctions, books that are lost, destroyed, and burnt on different occasions. The scholar regrettably discusses those that are lost and makes remarks that it's necessary to study those texts that have survived. These lines brought orality and text with equivalent weight as a repository of knowledge, intellectual tradition, and wisdom of the past. One of the characters, Liq Birhan, orally recounts several translated manuscripts, the works of multilingual scholars who have devoted their time to works of translation from several languages to Ge'ez. In this account, the voice of the scholar is dedicated to emphasizing the need to study texts, but he does so orally. Thus, oral recollection becomes one of how the history of texts is deposited, preserved, and passed on to another generation. Oral account of Liq Birhan is regarded as deep "knowledge" and "wisdom" by his audience, Tewaney. It is in this sense that the author foregrounds how knowledge is deposited and transmitted in the school of Qene to make a generalizable argument about orality and text. Both are to be regarded as important avenues of past knowledge. This view is further emphasized by illustrating the

centrality of memorializing in the school of Qene. Although the author uses the notion of memorializing instead of orality as a methodically organized form of preserving knowledge, it can still be argued that it embodies an element of orality to present what is memorized by heart. To keep interpretations and what has been read by heart is regarded highly than to keep it in writing.

The novel also ambivalently illustrates the tension between orality and text, with themes of the threat of loss of knowledge and preservation. Orality is conceived as a central way of preserving knowledge in the school of Qene. Yet the novel simultaneously highlights the problem of orality as a threat of loss of stored knowledge due to a lack of writing. Towards the end of the novel, the author emphasizes the necessity for writing.⁸ While writing notes is regarded as an act of laziness in earlier stages of Qene schools, scholars of Qene seem to be very concerned about the threat of loss of knowledge that is preserved orally. Thus, orality assumes both a status of excellence and a curse. After presenting this tension in the preservation of knowledge, the author seems to emphasize writing over orality. Therefore, in this novel, the author seems to argue that memorializing orally makes knowledge production and preservation possible and difficult. As a practice of preservation, she seems to suggest that contemporary historians need to engage existing religious texts for the reconstruction of history so as to both reconstruct the past and preserve it.

More importantly, the novel makes a strong argument about the use of religious texts, commentaries, Andemitas, and Qene compositions as sources for historical reconstruction mainly because biblical stories were thought by making references about contemporary histories and geographies of their time.⁹ Thus, the author makes the argument that the historian of today must study the Qene scholarly tradition and religious texts translated from multiple languages to reconstruct pre pre-1900 history of places and times. However, the threat to the extinction of these texts is mainly linguistic proficiency of ancient languages, in which some of these texts and orally recounted Qene are still in circulation. The language question is not forcefully presented here except as a matter-of-fact thing. However, these traditions reside in language and are circulated and preserved through mediums of language that are put to

⁸ *Mine to Win*: 199.

⁹ *Mine to Win*: 188.

use orally and in written text. If the languages are not recovered, it could be difficult to make the argument for preservation without the revival of the languages. One missed opportunity by the author is perhaps that multilingual scholarly traditions in the past did not necessitate the extinction of languages, but were able to translate books in various languages into Ge'ez, which played a role in developing the Ge'ez language. Meaning perhaps the Qene scholarly tradition was a product of a multilingual scholarly environment rather than a unique formation on its own. Thus, the use of Amharic and Ge'ez texts by contemporary historians and novelists could perhaps lead to the rejuvenation of both languages and scholarly traditions in today's multilingual context.

Concluding Remarks

Hiwot Teffera enters into the production of popular forms of remembering and imagining the past through this novel, *Mine to Win*. Locating the novel within the context of its production in 2016 enables the historian to situate the novel with historical developments in the time of its publication. The contemporary time seems to be witnessing a rise in the production of popular forms of remembering different periods and aspects of autobiographical and biographical past. Although this novel is not of a similar genre, its central storyline highlights a biography of a shepherd, a student, a scholar, and a chronicler as a fictional character. The author aims to reimagine the past through the biographical fictional trope of one character, Tawaney. Therefore, in the context of a boom in auto/ biographical reminiscing in the Ethiopian literary scene, Hiwot Teffera provides a way of imagining a periodized past of 1857-79 by depicting the life of a shepherd turned scholar in Qene Scholarly tradition. It does so by centering the school of Qene in the context of agrarian livelihood. The novel uses fictional intervention to open up a possibility of imagining life in pre-1900 in some part of the country.

The novel recognizes other genres. Most of the narrative is an orally delivered conversation to tell stories through its characters. More often, characters are made to deliver didactic instructions of their views in the first-person voice. This aspect of story storyline seems to posit the reader as a passive listener rather than an engaged reader. Although the author's storytelling technique tends to show the hierarchical aspect of intergenerational conversation as well as teachers'- learners' relations of inequality in delivering knowledge from the past, the older and senior scholar's voices are made the repository of whereas younger learners are constructed as receivers of the older wisdom. Such an aspect of characters' construction in this novel can also be linked to one of its

themes, the need to revisit past knowledge systems to remedy the present. This view perhaps underrecognizes the need to engage contemporary, intellectual, social, and historical conditions as products of the present as much as they are linked to the past. What kind of intervention is being suggested through the novel, other than being a memorial site for Qene Scholarly tradition, perhaps resides in the novel's fascination with the rigorous methodology of Andemita, which is an open-ended tradition of offering multiple and different interpretations of the same text. In which case, novelty resides in mapping, studying, and offering different and multiple interpretations of old texts and scholarly traditions than a notion of difference that needs to be done away with or sanitized to co-exist in simultaneity.