The Red Terror and Fascist Occupation in Literature from the Ethiopian Diaspora

Brandon Breen[1]

Abstract

This contribution provides an overview of diasporic Ethiopian literature, or rather literature that has emerged from the Ethiopian diaspora in different places around the world from authors that maintain a strong link to their homeland. Using a comparative approach, this article argues that diasporic Ethiopians have similar thematic preoccupations despite varying locations and personal backgrounds, exemplifying a new literary trend that is transnational. Considering the thematization of the Red Terror and the Fascist Occupation, the theory of postmemory is used to exemplify that current authors of Ethiopian descent are infused with the results of past traumas that they themselves did not experience. In conclusion, this leads to authors in the diaspora adopting a negative viewpoint of the Ethiopian government, as well as showcasing that Ethiopia's history cannot be solely looked at as victorious given the open wound represented by the Italian occupation.

Keywords: Transnationality, Diaspora, Ethiopian Literature, Red Terror, Fascist Occupation, Migration

1. Introduction

Following the Revolution in 1974, the Ethiopian diaspora emerged as Ethiopians fled political persecution and emigrated to nearby African countries and the United States, as well as other nations such as Canada, Italy, Israel, and the Netherlands. Ethiopia was the only African country to avoid colonization – notwithstanding a 5-year Fascist occupation – and thus was not forced to contend with any process of decolonization. This led to the Ethiopian diaspora forming relatively late when compared with other African countries, but Ethiopia has long been considered unique for its particular history. Unlike its neighboring countries, Ethiopia has a millennia-long tradition of literary production, is one of the world's oldest Christian countries (its Orthodox roots can be traced back to the fourth century), and in more recent times successfully repelled European invaders. As a result, Ethiopian literature in English was not written as early as in countries such as its neighboring Kenya, a former British colony. Given that Ethiopia has no colonial language and has

[1]PhD, H-FARM International School, Language and Literature: brandon.breen@h-is.com

its own alphabet, the recourse to English as a language of literary expression was a phenomenon that began in the 1960s, as English was becoming the dominant lingua franca in many parts of the world. Many Ethiopians turned to English as an expressive outlet in order to avoid government censors or in an attempt to gain a wider readership (Zarandona 2009, 126). The use of English became more widespread as diasporic Ethiopians established themselves in Washington, DC, for example, the city with the largest Ethiopian population outside of Africa. Before the massive waves of Ethiopian emigration, there had already been an Ethiopian presence in the US, Canada, and throughout Europe, due to students who were continuing their university studies abroad (Getahun 2007, 249; Giorgis 1989, 356-357).

Much of the well-known and read diasporic Ethiopian literature has emerged from the United States, Canada, and Italy. In the United States, authors such as Dinaw Mengestu, Maaza Mengiste, and Nafkote Tamirat have received critical acclaim. The most prominent Ethiopian author writing from Canada is the acclaimed and controversial Nega Mezlekia.[2] The Ethiopian diaspora in Italy has further specificities. As in other countries, some students already lived there before the Revolution. Some, like Gabriella Ghermandi, live in Italy because they are in part Italian, and left Ethiopia during the Revolution. More Ethiopians continued to arrive in Italy (and Europe in general) due to the violence and oppression following the 2005 elections in Addis Ababa; this is the case of the filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer (Mengiste 2012). Others continue to arrive, like Yimer, using the dangerous route of human trafficking through the Sahara to Libya and then on overcrowded boats to Italy (see the introduction to Brioni and Gulema 2018). The Ethiopian diaspora in Italy therefore has created itself over distinct periods of time in the final decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, with later arrivals being less related to a postcolonial link between the two countries.

While taking into consideration literature from the Ethiopian diaspora in the abovementioned countries, I will also review some works written in English by authors who live and work in Ethiopia and are themselves not migrants. This only gives weight to the transnationality of diasporic literature, I believe, since it showcases how authors in Ethiopia both elect to write in English and

[2] *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (2000) was immediately the subject of a legal controversy when Anne Stone, an established Canadian writer, claimed that she had ghost written all ***BUT*** twenty pages of the novel and was not credited (Milz 2008). Nega published two further novels with Penguin, one of the top five publishers worldwide: *The God Who Begat a Jackal* (2003) and *The Unfortunate Marriage of Azeb Yitades* (2006).

narratively analyze similar themes to those of their diasporic compatriots. This is the case of Abbie Gubegna's 1975 novella *Defiance,* about the Fascist Occupation, and Hama Tuma's 1993 collection of short stories, *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories.* Moreover, many of these authors want to actively build a better Ethiopia, and that includes being active in the diaspora through connections with Ethiopians around the world, writing in English, and publishing outside of Ethiopia. This is the case of authors such as Linda Yohannes who describes herself as "passionate about Ethiopia and intends to live the rest of her life there" (Mengiste 2020a, 247).

2. Ethiopian Writing in English

Although diasporic Ethiopian literature began to emerge only following the 1974 Revolution, diasporic African literature in itself has a longer tradition, especially in its facets that overlap with postcolonial literature. Typically considered the first English-language novel in the canon of African literature, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was first published in 1958 (Krishnan 2014, 11) and explored Nigeria's first encounter with the British colonial power. Due to many African countries being under control of the British Empire, English was the language of expression for many writers, which led in 1962 to the groundbreaking conference on African writing "Of English Expression" at Makerere University in Kampala. However, not a single author who attended the conference was from East Africa:

> For compared to its counterparts in West and southern Africa, East African writing in English appeared recent and belated: it was not until the middle of the 1960s that it began to acquire a distinctive identity and to capture the attention of literary critics and historians. For this reason, it could not escape the anxiety of influence generated by the presence of an impressive gallery of writers from the rest of the continent and the diaspora (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 7-8).

The recourse to English by earlier Ethiopian writers was both a political and stylistic choice, while also reflecting the desire to reach a wider public. The use of the English language allowed Ethiopian writers to avoid censors and print revolutionary ideas, to experiment with their country's long literary tradition in a new language, and to reach agreements with international printing presses. However, beginning at the turn of the century, Ethiopian diasporic authors who write in English chose the language mainly because it is the language of the country where they established themselves after leaving Ethiopia.

Although Ethiopian literature in English and other foreign languages emerged at a delay compared with other African nations, it boasts the originality of not confirming with the tradition of African postcolonial literatures. First and foremost, Ethiopia has an ancient literary tradition and system of writing. Ethiopian literature goes back over one thousand years in Ge'ez, the language of the clergy. Ethiopia in fact has "the only extended written tradition predating both the Arabic and European incursions into the continent" (Musila 2021, 4). The majority of ancient Ethiopian manuscripts dealt with religion, specifically Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. In the 1900s, more literature began to emerge in Amharic, although most writing was still closely linked with the church. In the 1950s and 60s, under the continental backdrop of fights for independence and the birth of the field of African literature, Ethiopian authors turned away from strictly religious writing, although censors from the imperial government first and then the Derg regime forced many to write in exile, or to write pro-government texts. For these reasons and due to Ethiopia having been a majorly Christian nation before any European country (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 2), Ethiopian diasporic authors are overwhelmingly in favor of Christianity. While other religions are followed in Ethiopia such as Islam and Judaism, they are not typically addressed in the works of Ethiopian diasporic authors, although Nega Mezlekia does take on folk religions in *The God Who Begat a Jackal* (2003). Ethiopian literature and identity are therefore deeply intertwined with Christianity, which was not a religion brought to Ethiopia by European missionaries as in the case of the rest of Africa, resulting in fact in a nationalist Ethiopian culture emerging a millennium before Western Europe (Gebre 2021, 61).

These linguistic and religious traditions therefore separate Ethiopian writers from their counterparts throughout Africa, and the arising thematic concerns are equally important. Daria Tunca, in giving an overview of diasporic African literature, writes that its main focus has changed in recent years: whereas many early African American works were centered on the experience of slavery, works emerging from the more recent African diasporas of the 20th century give space to the more common denominator of colonialism (Tunca 2012, 109). However, neither is the case of diasporic Ethiopian writers, who did not experience the transatlantic slave trade and were never colonized. In fact, Dereje Mulugeta argues that diasporic Ethiopian literature is different from Black African literature at large due to the fact that Ethiopian colonial experience is negligible, allowing authors to focus on their country's sovereignty (2012, 14-15). This gives a certain uniqueness and autonomy to Ethiopian writers, who tend to focus on the more recent phenomenon of

Ethiopian emigration and political struggle from the Haile Selassie regime to the present day. Despite not having experienced colonialism, some authors, such as Gabriella Ghermandi and Maaza Mengiste, claim that it is necessary to revisit the Fascist Occupation, whose longer-lasting effects were never truly taken into consideration due to a desire to quickly forget the ordeal (Breen 2021, 129-130) – a motion petitioned even by the Emperor himself (Shringarpure 2012). Nonetheless, the relative absence of colonial struggle in Ethiopia has allowed its writers to focus more on internal politics while at the same time employing English – or other languages – in writing as a conscious choice or a result of immigration, rather than the result of a colonial legacy.

3. Aims and Definitions

This contribution aims to consider short stories and novellas by Ethiopian authors, giving particular attention to those who are neither affiliated with the US nor popular, while considering lesser-known works from more established writers. Authors from an Ethiopian background approach similar topics such as the Red Terror, trauma, immigration, violence, nostalgia, culture, belonging, war, colonialism, and ethnicity; however, the simple fact that they address these "common sensibilities" (Hunegnaw 2016) does not necessarily mean that they do so in a uniform way. I would also argue for a rethinking of diasporic Ethiopian literature in transnational terms. First of all, belonging to a diaspora is not necessarily automatic, nor does it imply transnationalism, which implicates a commitment throughout diaspora and various and multiple nations. Transnational literature has several key characteristics that the selected texts concern themselves with as well. Transnationalism is not bound by the binary of the local versus the global and can occur in and across different spaces and times (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 6). In the case of literature emerging from Ethiopia, diasporic writers "forge new notions of fluid transnational identities through connecting the past and the present" (Hunegnaw 2016, 3). The diasporic Ethiopian authors under analysis here write across decades and continents, in different languages and about different time periods concerning their country of origin. In fact, Mukoma Wa Ngugi writes that transnational literature is rooted in multiples cultures, nations, and languages (2018, 180). Authors in the Ethiopian diaspora exemplify these characteristics of transnational literature, as will be seen. Although this literature is written throughout different nations, Neelam Srivastava argues that in the Ethiopian case, transnationalism is not post-national as diasporic Ethiopian writers greatly concern themselves with sociopolitical problems and the cultures and traditions of their homeland and are active members of the

diaspora (2018, 69). This contribution in no means aims to be an exhaustive list nor an examination of all writers of Ethiopian heritage currently active in the field of contemporary literature. Rather, it intends to expand the scope of contemporary studies of Ethiopian literature, both establishing further "common sensibilities" and advancing a problematization of some of the concepts addressed.

4. Literary Criticism

From the point of view of scholarly literature in the Anglo-American world, two journal special issues have been dedicated entirely to Ethiopia and its diaspora. The first is the Fall/Winter 2006[3] issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies,* published by the University of Toronto, entitled "Special Issue: Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora: Perspectives from Across the Disciplines" and edited by Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Steven Kaplan. The special issue touches on cultural creativity in the Ethiopian Diaspora and crosses topics such as information technology, elections and transnational politics, religion as seen by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and music and poetry. This special issue is joined by the Spring 2010 special issue of *Callaloo*, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, and entitled "Ethiopia: Literature, Art & Culture," edited by Charles Henry Rowell. This volume takes a more creative approach, showcasing the work of Ethiopian writers and poets who write both in Amharic and English. The volume also includes interviews with Ethiopian intellectuals and demographic groups; essays on topics such as language, sexuality, and masculinity; and reviews of published books, among a plethora of other content. Both special issues, published around relatively the same time, signal an Ethiopian turn in diaspora, literary, and cultural studies in the Anglo-American world at large. Both issues also contain articles and creative works that offer the possibility of considering the Ethiopian diaspora transnationally: rooted in diasporans' country or countries of residence/home/belonging, connected together through diasporic activity, and frequently looking back and investing in Ethiopia.

[3] Despite being cataloged as an issue from 2006, many of the articles in the issues discuss facts, studies, and research carried out in 2007-2009. When downloading the articles, a 2011 copyright appears on the pdf. This discrepancy in reporting the year of publication versus the content in the special issue clearly shows that 2006 was not the year of release, but most likely 2010 or 2011.

5. Methodology

5.1 Selection of Texts

In selecting the primary sources for analysis, I aimed to go beyond a bibliography limited to just the higher-selling works of acclaimed Ethiopian American authors such as Dinaw Mengestu and Maaza Mengiste. Texts included for selection needed to be written by an author of Ethiopian origin, originally written in either English or Italian, and published after the 1974 Revolution. The genre of the literary works was irrelevant as I found that similar themes naturally emerged from different kinds of writing. Problems accessing some texts did arise, as many – mainly ones published in Ethiopia – are no longer in print and are not easily available to scholars working abroad. This is the case of the books by Abbie Gubegna and Hama Tuma, which I was finally able to retrieve from an online vendor from Australia in the first case and from an online library in the second. Outside of Ethiopia, I selected works in Italian by Gabriella Ghermandi (short story), Martha Nasibù (memoir), and Maria Abbebù Viarengo (memoir). For texts written in English, I selected two short stories by Rebecca Fisseha and Solomon Hailemariam from the collection *Addis Ababa Noir*, as well as the earlier texts *Defiance* by Abbie Gubegna and *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories* by Hama Tuma. For the texts written in Italian, all quotes in English were translated by me.

5.2 Theoretical Framework

Although scholars have had a difficult time defining comparative literature, one of the more accepted attempts at definition has been that it is an effort "to pool the resources of the variously related literature, to cross the linguistic barriers that confine them within the framework of national histories and provide an area for the consideration of their common features and underlying forces" (Bandopadhyay 2021, 180). Moreover, comparison "must begin with the acceptance of an equality amongst narratives, subjectivities, cultures, and texts" (Bandopadhyay 2021, 181). This article therefore takes a comparative approach, analyzing texts that have been published from 1975 to 2024, originally in English or Italian, from Ethiopia, Italy, the United States, and Canada. This allows me to ascertain the themes that these works have in common and how different authors address the same themes across time and space. In a perfunctory analysis, two essential topics addressed in the literary corpus came to light. The first is the Red Terror, the initial period of the Revolution, typically considered to be at its peak in the years 1976-78. The

second is the Italo-Ethiopian War and subsequent Fascist Occupation of 1936-1941. This is surprising due to the previously mentioned uniqueness of Ethiopia under the backdrop of a colonized Africa. Despite Ethiopia's particular history, some Ethiopian authors express a need to revisit the Italian invasion.

In order to address these two themes, I will adopt the abovementioned comparative approach, considering the texts equal on the narrative plane and not giving utmost important to a single author on the basis of provenance, language, or renown. To embark on this comparison, I will use framework provided by trauma theory, which is useful to ascertain how the violence of the thematic preoccupations affects members throughout the diaspora. Although trauma theory gained recognition thanks to the scholar Cathy Caruth (1996), her work has since been reevaluated as being homogenizing and dehistoricizing (Visser 2011, 274), and many scholars have advanced different ways of conceptualizing trauma by including analyses of communities and not just of individuals (Rothberg 2008, 228). In particular, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory will be used to investigate the texts' representation of the Red Terror and Fascist Occupation:

> Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch 2008, 106-107).

This can also be the case of those who were infants or children during traumatic events and were technically alive for them, but have no vivid memories.

5.3 Objectives

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, to establish what the politics of these texts are and if they change based on the author's location and personal background. Second, to determine if the trauma of the Red Terror and Fascist Occupation persists in the writing of modern Ethiopian authors as postmemory. The expected findings are that most authors will have a negative reaction towards the Derg regime, given that their families were forced into exile due to the Red Terror. Moreover, it is suspected that authors writing from Italy are more concerned with the Fascist Occupation and may be sympathetic to the Italian aggressor.

6. Common Thematic Sensibilities

6.1 The Red Terror

The Red Terror was the period of violent repression of antirevolutionary activists who fought against the Derg government. The color red represents the communist regime, as well as the violence of the repression, exemplified by Mengistu Haile Mariam's smashing of bottles of red paint. The Red Terror resulted in the persecution of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians, supposedly in response to the White Terror carried out by reactionaries against the military government (Wiebel 2017). None of these works of creative fiction and nonfiction address the idea of a White Terror, preferring instead to focus on the violence carried out by the Derg and viewing the opposing factions as more ethical in their convictions. This could be due to the fact that the families of the authors in consideration were forced to flee the country during the Red Terror due to political prosecution, and many had relatives who died.

Several stories in the collection *Addis Ababa Noir* (2020) have the Ethiopian Revolution and the Red Terror as a central theme, including "Ostrich" by Rebecca Fisseha and "None of Your Business" by Solomon Hailemariam. The former discusses a young Ethiopian woman who is haunted by flashes of memories from her childhood during the Red Terror while the latter showcases the brutality of Mengistu's regime through the murder of an elementary school student. While "Ostrich" paints a grim picture of the mid-1970s in Ethiopia and its effects on the diaspora in the current day, "None of Your Business," while tragic, is almost satiric in its message: the boy's homework is to discover more about the Ethiopian constitution under Mengistu's regime, yet he is murdered by the very people who claim to uphold the values of that constitution. Despite their differences, both stories are brought together by their focus on the different facets of the Red Terror and the effects that it has on their characters' lives.

In "Ostrich" the main character is an unnamed Ethiopian woman who lives in Toronto, haunted by the shadow of the Red Terror that she experienced as a girl in Addis Ababa. The short story offers a grim view of diaspora and the possibility of overcoming trauma. The unnamed protagonist of "Ostrich" sees a dead man with a notice attached to him sprawled on the road next to the old royal palace. As a young girl, the narrator first believes the man to be sleeping, until she overhears her parents talking about him and saying that he is dead. Since that moment, every time she takes that road with her mother to pick up her father after work, she imagines that the dead body of the man is there and

that they are driving over him numerous times, despite the fact that after a day the body is already gone:

> I had to feel the car crushing the man's head, breaking his hands and feet, flattening his tattered red chest under our tires. I hated it for the squelching sound of the man's flesh and the jab of his splintered bones that vibrated into my body, past the tires and the metal of the car (Fisseha 2020, 52).

The dead man was clearly murdered by the Derg and left as a warning to other 'counterrevolutionaries.' In this passage, what stands out is the use of language that focuses on the body and on physical sensations. The consonance of sharp words such as "jab," "splintered," "vibrated," showcase the harshness of trauma through lexicon. For the narrator, the experience of trauma is an incredibly physical moment that is continuously experienced, despite the fact that it is entirely imagined.

Becoming an adult and immigrating to Canada does nothing to ease the trauma as, especially after the death of her parents, the narrator believes the dead man to still be with her as a ghost. This pessimistic vision of an inescapable trauma shows that the Ethiopian diaspora at large has yet to overcome the traumatic experience of the Red Terror. Although, after almost causing her photographer friend Nick to be killed in a car accident, the narrator realizes that the ghost of the dead man has finally disappeared:

> I felt ashamed. He [Nick] was the end to my loneliness, not some ghost, and I had almost turned him into the very thing he'd tried so hard to pry out of me – a dead man. On the camera display, one body part at a time, the sleeping man faded, leaving a simple snapshot of a bare rise gray cracked asphalt (Fisseha 2020, 65).

"Ostrich" suggests that trauma can be healed through community, but that it must be laced with violence. Fisseha thus presents a disturbing contradiction: it is possible to overcome trauma, but only once another violent event supplants it. In fact, postmemory does not necessarily offer a solution on how to overcome generational trauma, rather it notes the importance of keeping memories alive throughout generations in order to respect one's ancestors and to not forget histories of violence, at the risk of perpetuating them. Postmemory attempts to reactive personal and cultural memories so that "less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone" (Hirsch 2008, 111). This story therefore

functions as a way of recovering memory, while not necessarily offering any clear solutions to the original trauma.

While Fisseha crafts a dark, emotional story, other authors use irony and satire to ridicule the Derg regime. "None of Your Business" by Solomon Hailemariam, as well as Gabriella Ghermandi's short story "All'ombra dei rami sfacciati, carichi di fiori rosso vermiglio" (In the Shade of Broken Branches, Full of Vermilion-Red Flowers) focus on the weaponized military and police forces during the Red Terror and their gratuitous displays of power in intimidatory and violent ways. In "None of Your Business" the main character Tadesse, a primary school student, is given homework to ask an adult about what liberties the Ethiopian constitution provides. In a tragic ending that is foreshadowed by his brother's beating at the hands of police officers, Tadesse is struck by a police baton and is ironically killed by the very people who are supposed to defend and uphold the liberties of Ethiopia's new constitution. Gelila, Tadesse's neighbor, confronts the cops right before the fatal moment affirming: "You're supposed to protect and serve the public, but instead you are beating innocent people. What happened to justice? Is there no law in this country?" (Hailemariam 2020, 226). The character of Gelila, in fact, embodies the actual socialist ideals that the military dictatorship only claims to have. With Tadesse, she "patiently explained how the constitution protected both human and democratic rights, and helped him copy down relevant passages from a pocket-sized copy of the country's constitution" (Hailemariam 2020, 223). This juxtaposition of those who truly believe in democratic values and those who only claim to uphold them but instead enforce violent practices reflects the sociopolitical reality of Ethiopia at the time, such as the student protests (see Zewde 2001, chapter 5, section 4, The Ethiopian Student Movement).

A glimpse of the effects of Derg regime in the Ethiopian countryside is given in "All'ombra dei rami sfacciati, carichi di fiori rosso vermiglio," putting on display the government's constant propaganda. While the main character's family is still in Addis Ababa, they are shocked to see that the military is supposedly safeguarding 'ideology' by keeping citizens at home and establishing a curfew. This interest about the curfew and the militarization of the capital could also stem from Ghermandi's personal experience, as she grew up in Ethiopia during this time before moving permanently to Italy. In the story, the family has to obtain permission from the regime to leave the capital and go to a city farther south, but the ban on all things American and Western still exists there – in order to protect the aforementioned 'ideology.'

The story ends with the protagonist ironically comparing the Derg to Haile Selassie's regime. Both were oppressive in their own ways and the support or condemnation of foreign superpowers remains a consistent trait of totalitarian regimes:

> in place of American TV movies, we found ourselves watching the pirouettes of a Russian gymnast competing in an artistic gymnastic tournament. Unfortunately for us, that was the new TV, the TV of the people's government. Just artistic gymnastic exhibitions, piano concerts, military parades, and political propaganda (Ghermandi 2010, 72).

Both Hailemariam and Ghermandi condemn the Derg in their narratives using irony. In the first case, the representation of an overexcited and deadly police force showcases the potential for brutality that regime has. In the second case, the ban on products and television shows the changing international loyalties of a government who does not really care about its citizens. While Fisseha's short story has a more opaque and implicit presentation of the Red Terror, concentrating instead on the trauma and dispersal that it caused, Hailemariam and Ghermandi focus the lens on the injustices of a militarized police force and the new propaganda that is spewed by the regime, in schools and on television.

The irony on display in Hailemariam and Ghermandi's short stories almost borders on political satire and owes much to a preceding collection of stories, *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories* (1993), by Hama Tuma. Satire can briefly be thought of as a criticism of a certain society and how it departs from the satirist's perceived norms, using laughter to correct the perceived societal faults (wa Thiong'o 1972, 55). Indeed, as James Ogude notes, "Hama Tuma's satire works to lay bare, before our eyes, the monstrosity that is the essence of this regime" (2000, 89). The stories in this collection touch both on the senseless violence carried out by the Derg and the reverence of Russian ideology, as seen in the stories by Hailemariam and Ghermandi. In "The Case of the Valiant Torturer," Tuma highlights, as Ghermandi does, that the Haile Selassie and Derg governments are not so different by showcasing how they both used torture to achieve their ends. However, whereas under the imperial regime the use of torture was hushed up, under the revolutionary regime torture is encouraged. The torturer on trial in the story speaks of his expertise and how the Derg encourages him to be even crueler: "Pushing a bottle into the vagina and snap-kicking it upward, a hot iron rod into the anus, peeling the skin slowly and layer after layer from the arm and thigh and force-feeding the bastard his own flesh […]" (Tuma 1993,

29) and the list goes on. The methods described here are certainly cruel and violent, but the satiric view of the situation comes from the revelation throughout the narrative of the complete uselessness of torture. Furthermore, the ultimate punishment for the torturer is not death or imprisonment, but rather a reduced quota of the amount of people he can torture, which the accused views as worse than death. The nonsensical ideologies are also ridiculed along with the violent methods of the Revolutionary government. In almost every story there is a reference to the Soviet Union or other communist states such as Bulgaria or North Korea. As Ghermandi points out, under Haile Selassie there were American programs and products, but now, as Tuma's stories reveal, it is Russia that is the model for Ethiopia, showing how Ethiopia is merely "a pawn in the Superpower rivalry" (Ogude 2000, 94). Throughout the collection, the author continuously reminds the reader of the uncommon and strange nature of Ethiopian humor – a sentiment echoed by Nafkote Tamirat as well (Doan 2018) – a stinging humor that breaks apart the fallacies of the Derg. Before any of the diasporic authors in this corpus, Hama Tuma first criticized the Red Terror and the government behind it in his literature, becoming a pillar in contemporary Ethiopian writing in English and being condemned by the government.

In conclusion, the texts analyzed here showcase the transnationality of Ethiopian literature as they deal with themes of politics and community across Ethiopia and internationally as authors in diaspora and exile. Furthermore, many authors in the diaspora write from a generational removal. Although they may have vague recollections of the Red Terror from childhood, the absence of firsthand experience does not necessarily detract from the weight of their judgment, but it does highlight the importance of postmemory. Authors such as Fisseha, as well as Mengiste, base their literary works on accounts by family members or other Ethiopians who directly experienced the violence of the Red Terror. The first novel by Mengiste, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, is also steeped in historical research; the author even includes a bibliography of secondary sources at the end of the novel. The fact that all of these texts are not firsthand accounts but instead builds narratives based on familial recollections and historical sources may compromise the plausibility of the portrayal of certain themes and politics.[4] As seen, these authors have a clear revulsion towards the Derg and are inclined by their family history to

[4] Mengiste, in fact, was told by a reader who fought against the Derg that her idea of recovering the dead bodies on display in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* would have been logistically impossible (Imma 2014).

renounce the regime's harmful policies. What is important here is that the authors are crafting narrative works and not historical ones. Indeed, basing their plots and characters on family memories highlights how the trauma of the Red Terror was passed down vividly from those who experienced it, giving memories to their descendants that seem almost real, allowing them to create works of fiction to capture the emotive power behind the experiences of political persecution and forced emigration. This is the theory of postmemory on full display: the traumatic event continues to live on in generations who did not directly experience it, and in writing about it they are able to recover and remember a history that belongs to them as well.

6.2 Fascist Occupation

Another common topic in recent diasporic Ethiopian literature is the war between Italy and Ethiopia. This has been most thoroughly expressed in novel form in Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and in Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Queen of Flowers and Pearls), both of which have received scholarly attention (Breen 2021, Marzagora 2015, and many others). It is no coincidence that the Fascist Occupation is central mainly in books by Ethiopian Italian authors, who are "products of Italian colonialism" (Clò 2009, 143) and live the memory of the occupation daily on their own skin. Although not a central theme in other works, it is nonetheless frequently mentioned: "When I was young I had heard people describe the war with the Italians and I understood that our land was so beautiful that they wanted it for themselves" (Macoggi 2011, 48); "Remind them of those terrible days of Mussolini's mustard gas and tanks, when I stood before nations and battled bigotry with truth" (Mengiste 2011, 43); "My father's father was a soldier and died while fighting the Italians" (Tamirat 2019, 17). This gives further credence to how the historical memory lives on and how it affects the lives of Ethiopians. Even though the Italo-Ethiopian War did not lead to the creation of a diaspora, it is still a topic that diasporans are aware of and across the transnational space it is a history that they have personal links to.

Abbie Gubegna's English language novel *Defiance* (1975), written in Ethiopia following the Revolution, can be seen as a precursor to the works mentioned above.[5] Furthermore, he, together with Martha Nasibù, are the only authors in

[5] Regarding the literary market, novels from Americans and Europeans are more marketable and easier to acquire than novels written by Africans in Africa, even if they are written in English. *Defiance* was incredibly difficult for me to acquire even though it was published by a

this corpus who actually lived through the Italian invasion, although they were both children at the time. His is the first and only work, scholarly or otherwise, that I encountered that refers to the 1935-36 conflict as the "Ethio-Italian war" (Gubegna 1975, 29), rather than 'Italo-Ethiopian.' This functions as a way of recentering the conflict as one that takes place in Ethiopia and as such it gives agency back to the Ethiopians that underwent the invasion. In no part of the novel does Gubegna even refer to the Italian presence as an occupation, and he consistently uses the word 'Fascist' to distinguish from the Italians who are not Fascists and wish no harm to Ethiopians. In fact, the author makes a point to constantly differentiate between the two, leading to a long discussion by an Ethiopian patriot to the *fitawrari*:

> '[...] Is white skin the source of all these evils?' railed the *fitawrari*.
>
> 'Not white skin, sir. Not even the skin of the Italians. But fascism. The Italians were, and still many of them are, among the most humane peoples in the world. But fascism made great monsters such as Graziani, Angelo, and others out of that compassionate people. The fascists are torturing not only us. They have inflicted the same horror on many innocent Italians too. They kill them, torture them, exile them. Of course, we cannot compare theirs with ours. But the fascists and the Italians are quite different. I have lived with them. Some of them aren't even colonialists! Every society has its own devils and angels. And Italian society isn't exceptional. But, unlike in heaven, on this earth the angels are, most of the time, defeated by the devils,' said Asmerem. (Gubegna 1975, 86-87).

Gubegna's stance is clear: although Italy waged a technologically advanced war with colonial aspirations against Ethiopia, the Ethiopian patriots never surrendered. In fact, it is significant that this novel was published in 1975, at the beginning of the Derg regime, at a time when censorship of literary texts was common and Gubegna himself had already been a target of the government, which, as the back cover of the novel attests "led at one stage to a three years' forced confinement to a restricted area." The novel was allowed to be published, without censorship, most likely because it painted Ethiopians in a fair light, as fighters, as people with a long and distinguished cultural history, on par with or even better than the Italians, and therefore the Derg could only approve of such a text. However, the author remained critical of the

well-known agency and figures in several works of criticism on Ethiopian literature (Azeze 1985, 38; Griffiths 2000, 263; Mulugeta 2012, 28; Zaradona 2009).

government and died only a few years after the publication of this novel, in unclear and suspicious circumstances (Alemu 1992, 9; Marzagora 2016, 282).[6]

Showcasing Ethiopian agency and pride is not the only significant aspect of *Defiance*. Well before the release of Ghermandi and Mengiste's novels, which center the stories of female soldiers (Breen 2021), Gubegna gave voice to Ethiopian women who were militarily active in combat against the Italian occupation. The main character, who is known simply as the *fitawrari*, fights with his wife Wesenie at his side: "'You have decided to die with me; so you must fire with me,' he said and gave his wife the loaded gun and showed her how to aim at the enemy and pull the trigger" (Gubegna 1975, 177). Furthermore, their daughter, Aster, who could be an inspiration for Mengiste's character of the same name in *The Shadow King*, also fights against the Italians and indeed retakes control of her personhood and decides her fate for herself, killing the general who had raped her:

> But a maddened Aster snatched a short sword from the hand of one soldier and before anyone could stop her, she tensed herself and with both hands she drove the sword into the neck of the prisoner. The wretched man uttered a sharp cry and lay flat upon the floor. The blood ran from where the general lay groaning, to the door, in only a thin line as if it were trying to escape (Gubegna 1975, 153).

This passage is significant also because it grants Ethiopian women an agency that was often denied them in official accounts, and is done so by a male author, clouding perceptions of stereotypes and gender roles.

A nonfictional account of the war is given in *Memorie di una principessa etiope* (Memories of an Ethiopian Princess). Martha Nasibù's father was a high-ranking soldier in the Negus's army, who was exposed to the deadly gas launched by Italian planes: "degiac Nasibù, not caring about the risk, exposed himself in battle to the toxic gas that had desecrated a large part of his army […] his lungs burned by that terrible poison" (Nasibù 2005, 138). Describing his slow, painful death and the decimation of his army due to the mustard gas functions as a way to condemn Fascist Italy for its use of weapons prohibited in war by the Geneva conventions, which the Italian government and veterans

[6] Sources vary when setting a date for Gubegna's death. Marzagora writes that he died of a pub brawl in 1980, whereas Alemu writes that "[d]uring one of his visits to the capital, Addis Ababa, he was found dead in a hotel room. His death was clandestinely accomplished and nobody could trace its causes [...] Abbe died in 1972 [sic 1982] at the age of forty-seven" (Alemu 1992, 9).

continued to deny, despite many eyewitness accounts, until historian Angelo Del Boca unearthed the official documents authorizing the use of the gas almost sixty years later (Fattore 2022, 118; Srivastava 2018, 19). Both Gubegna and Nasibù lived through the Italian invasion but were very young children. Nonetheless, in her autobiography, Nasibù recounts episodes from when she was four years old, claiming either to remember them herself or to have had her memory refreshed by her mother. Similarly to authors dealing with the Red Terror, the account of these 'memories' cannot be considered completely reliable as historical documents. However, the conception of postmemory allows us to see that the complete veracity of these accounts is of less importance than their emotional impact. The trauma of the invasion, the death of her father in the war, and – in the case of the remaining Nasibù family – forced migration throughout Africa and then to Italy was so intense that it remained with the author throughout her life. She thus remembers or seems to remember it vividly, and with the help of relatives and historical documents, reconstructs the initial years of her life almost 70 years after they occurred. Like Gubegna, Nasibù also makes a clear separation between Fascists and Italians and demonstrates a desire for historical accuracy, not willing to condemn an entire country for her father's death and the occupation. Both authors lived through the occupation but in their works of fiction and nonfiction, neither express a clear-cut hatred for Italians, preferring instead to contextualize the historical events as accurately as possible, despite the trauma of having lived through them.

The following authors who narratively recount the Fascist Occupation are recipients of postmemory in the most straightforward sense: they were not alive during the events but bring them to life in their literature, showcasing a trauma that seems to be inherited both directly from family members and from cultural legacy. The first is Maria Abbebù Viarengo, born to an Ethiopian mother and an Italian father in 1949. In her recent memoir, *Nel marsupio della storia. Italiani d'Etiopia* (In the Pouch of History: The Italians of Ethiopia), she recounts the life of her father Oreste, who lived in Ethiopia as a miner years before Mussolini enacted his ambitions of imperial expansion. Viarengo calls attention to her own history of being a mixed-race child born of a father who was not an invader but rather completely inserted into the cultural reality of Ethiopia and a fluent speaker of both Amharic and Oromo. Through her father's eyes, Viarengo recounts the atrocities that the Fascist soldiers committed, while maintaining the same distinction between Fascism and Italians that was seen in Gubegna and Nasibù's works: "Italy gave birth to me, Ethiopia raised me, I love both lands. I didn't have enemies in either place, our

enemy was that Fascist invasion" (Viarengo 2024, 77). Despite maintaining this position, the author describes the massacres in Addis Ababa and Amba Aradan, mainly with the intent to educate an unaware Italian public. In fact, when she hears an Italian use the expression 'fare un ambaradan,' she writes: "I feel a tightening [in my stomach]" (Viarengo 2024, 113). Italians use this expression to mean that someone has made a big mess, ignorant that its origins lie in the 'messy' massacre at said mountain. Despite only learning of these events second-hand through her father, the author nonetheless feels physical revulsion when forced to recall them, demonstrating the real psychological impact that postmemory can have.

A more ironic account of the war can be seen in Hama Tuma's short story "Tales of the Highway Fire," which has the Italian invasion as its focal point, in contrast to all the other stories in the collection which focus on the Red Terror. This singular story calls to attention the *bandas*, or rather the Ethiopians who, betraying their own people, collaborated with the Italian invaders:

> 'Those were really hard times,' began the old man. 'The king had fled and we were like bees without a head. The Italians were strong and thousands of *bandas*, traitors, were helping them. We lacked modern weapons and even ammunition for the few guns we had. But independence being so sacred, we rose up. We had courage, love for our country, spears, axes, a few guns. And we knew the terrain (Tuma 1993, 162).

An unnamed old man tells the story of when he was a soldier fighting against the Fascist invaders and, only decades after the conclusion of the war, discovered that he was betrayed by a fellow companion and close friend. While calling attention to the violence committed by the Italians, the short story implicitly considers the betrayal by fellow Ethiopians to be an even greater offense, resulting in an unexpected trauma related to one's own compatriots. Maria Abbebù Viarengo also comments on this topic in her memoir: "Unfortunately more than one ras had sold himself to the Italians: many continued to betray, selling themselves to the highest bidder, upsetting the resistance's plans" (Viarengo 2024, 124). In his short stories, Hama Tuma focuses on the interworking of Ethiopian society and how different people with various ethnicities and languages interact under different governments. It is no surprise, therefore, that the author singles out the Ethiopian *bandas*, and not the Italian invaders, as the villain in his story. Having seen firsthand how the Revolutionary government treated its citizens, Tuma is more inclined to analyze injustices inside Ethiopian society itself. The truly emotional, visceral

surprise and hatred that the old man has for the betrayers showcase who the more hated enemy of the Ethiopian patriot was. The postmemorial trauma exhibited in this story is not as impactful as that in Viarengo's memoir, however, the fact that Tuma chose to incorporate this tale into his collection of stories mainly of the Red Terror shows that despite the firsthand trauma of the Revolution, the trauma of the Fascist Occupation still lives on in the imagination of the Ethiopian writer.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the texts taken into consideration offers insight not only into the style and preoccupations of diasporic Ethiopian writers, but into their politics as well. Their short stories, novellas, and novels take a staunchly anti-government stance that involves denouncing the Derg for the atrocities committed during the Red Terror and throughout Mengiste Haile Mariam's leadership. The possibility of a White Terror, or rather, similar violence carried out by counter-revolutionary reactionaries, is scarcely taken into consideration. This could be due to the fact that all of these authors and their families were forced to flee Ethiopia due to persecution by said government, creating a lasting Ethiopian diaspora. These feelings of alienation and nostalgia, as well as the desire to reconnect with their past and their homeland, all cause the authors to denounce the Derg regime even when they did not directly experience it themselves or were too young to remember it. Moreover, the authors do not explicitly focus on the inner workings of the political system after the Revolution. The post-Revolution struggle, the desire for a people's government, and the different armed political factions that were eventually created and overthrew the Derg regime are rarely discussed, if at all. This is not the case of authors who lived through this time period firsthand, as there are more extensive accounts of the different factions at play in texts such as *In the Hyena's Belly* and *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*. Authors who write of the Fascist Occupation show a more well-rounded conception of politics at the time, differentiating between Italians and Fascists, affirming the independence of Ethiopia and the essentialness of its patriots, as well as calling to attention the Ethiopians who betrayed their country for money and power. This is in part surprising as they refuse to make a blanket statement of Italians as the enemy, which perhaps can be linked to the authors having a deep relationship with Italy and having Italian family members. The theory of postmemory shows us that the thematic preoccupations of diasporic Ethiopian writers stem from unsolved traumas that can be seen as inherited from their family members and shared culture. The act

of writing and recovering lost stories of the Red Terror and Fascist Occupation can be seen as an attempt both to heal from the trauma of history and to pay respect to the generations of Ethiopians who fought for freedom in different contexts. In conclusion, the texts analyzed here address national concerns that have Ethiopia as the focal point, connecting them not only to Italy but to the diasporic community at large, creating a literature from different places and different generations of Ethiopians that exemplifies the concerns of transnationality.

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