

ይወስዳል መንገድ፣ ያመጣል መንገድ - አዳም ረታ “The Path that takes and brings back” – Adam Reta

Roman Tewolde

It is the evening of a rather historic day, both in events of the nation and the narrator’s story. The Municipality building in Addis Ababa has been blown up (marking the beginning of regime change). The narrator being aware of this is however chanced with a last sexual encounter with his childhood sweetheart. A speck of hay comes to mind.

It is on this evening, the narrator tells us that “He wished (missed) to be in his bedroom, lying on his back, reading any book” (pg 79) “መኝታ ክፍሌ በጀርባዬ ተጋድሜ የሆነ መፅሐፍ ማንበብ ናፈቀኝ”. The one impossible thing to do while reading this book, is to be lying on one’s back. It is a proper - sit down, take note, analyse, re-read, highlight, make-notes, go back a few more pages, come back to, refer to, re-read again and digest book. It is the sort of book that slowly but surely sinks gently into the skin and heart, just like the invisible dust speckles settle on a surface.

Amharic by its nature and literary history has a tendency of being written in riddles (insinuations) /kine/ ቅኔ. The author utilises this to a T, but not overwhelmingly, whereby the reader would be seeking the gold or asking “what does that mean?” at every turn of a page.

The book is narrated with easy to understand language, yet deeply penetrating gestures and descriptions. The language is quite poetic with short verses spread throughout the book like spicy teasers. Not that I’ve read a lot of Amharic novels or literature, but more than often I am challenged by the language used, which comes across hard-core.

On the whole anything with too much detail can be off-putting, but the author of this book somehow manages to tie up these details into bigger themes, which gives you a sense of being at the place and time where the story is actually being narrated. The beauty and genius of it is mostly in the detailed descriptions. For instance, on the historic day when the Municipality building was blown up, the narrator says “Maybe a bird’s egg in one of the pine trees surrounding St George’s Church has prematurely cracked when the Municipality was blown up”. (pg 67) “ማዘጋጃ ቤት ሲፈነዳ፣ ጊዮርጊስን ከከበቡት የፅድ ዛፎች ላይ ሊፈለፈሉ ከተዘጋጁ የወፍ እንቁላሎች አንዱ ያለግዜው ተሰንጥቆ ይሆናል።” In the big scheme of things – to think of a crack on a single bird’s egg is detail finesse!

Structure

The core of the book (in the middle of the book) and the main theme as the title suggests, is broken into seven roads - dust, earth, asphalted roads. This part of the book is narrated in snip-bits which seemingly look separate and unattached. But these are so very inter-linked and intertwined to give yet again a detailed picture of the characters, the political climate and changes in the narrator’s story.

The first road and 2nd roads are of birth, childhood and innocence. The 3rd road is of adolescence and facing facts of life, such as death and becoming socially and politically aware. The 4th road is of being more and more politically active and rebelling against the prevailing system – as well as deeper and more meaningful romantic encounters. The 5th road is about solitude and losing all

childhood innocence and more about soul-searching and distance. The 6th road is the troubles and turmoil faced due to political ideology and finding out to be on the opposing side of childhood friends as well as a first lover. It is on this road we find the narrator flees to a foreign land. The 7th and final road is a dream – a dream which ties up all the roads and journeys together in layers and knots. It depicts life in a strange and foreign land (where visible specks of dust are rare).

What is in speck of dust?

The thinking of dust as just a single piece of dirt is thrown out of the window literally. The narrator incorporates this tiny, invisible, seemingly insignificant speck of dust into the whole story of his upbringing, neighborhood and adulthood, into his being, into political philosophy and into what makes him who he is and has become. The beauty of it is again in the detail. The narrator summarizes such complicated and complex concepts in seemingly simple way. “እዛ ቤት ውስጥ ስመላለስ፣ ስተኛ፣ ስጫወትና ስበላ ወዘተ... “መሬት የሕዝቦች ነው” ያልኩት በዚህ ጠረን ፍልስፍና ነው።” (pg 112).

The following and preceding chapters from the core (the 7 roads) are seemingly separate short stories of different characters, while the main character and narrator still remains in the scenes if not in the narration. These range from the childhood stories in the beginning of the book to stories about prostitution, bullying, love and marriage to life abroad in the latter chapters. What it means to be an Ethiopian that has either been forced/or chose to lead a life abroad are depicted for what they really are. The sense of being an Ethiopian as well what it really means to be alienated from culture and society is vividly depicted. A superb example is the story of Mama Workie/ አማማ ወርቁ በአሜሪካ (starting on pg. 235 - በር). For me, Mama Workie actually represents what I idealize as my own mother county, Mama Ethiopia – her history tarred with battles and struggles, her doors and arms always open and always earnestly praying for the welfare of her children.

Although the short story chapters are separate and in some cases within the same chapter, they are interdependent on one another and their overall effect is what makes the story of the whole book. They are like the stories within a story, within another story building up to the bigger theme of the book.

Style

The narrator’s childhood is narrated in a child’s voice/ from a child’s perspective, but the narrator never underestimates his reader. Profound and adult themes are subtly discussed in the adult conversations. This style of narration is kept consistent throughout the book. As he moves into adolescence and adulthood, so does the voice and perspective of the narrator. The probing and moral questions are presented in seemingly simple statements and conversations. For example: in the conversation between his teenage friends Lidetu and Berry, Lidetu says: “You don’t throw bread to people, you throw it to dogs” (pg. 55), “አንተ ለሰው ዳቦ አይወረወርም፣ ለውሻ ነው” implying the profound concept that the Ferenjis have actually considered you as dogs by throwing the bread to you. This raises further questions of morality and integrity, yet from an adolescent’s perspective.

The book is written in what may feel as an auto-biographical style. The author has explained this in detail, in that it could be:

1. Because Amharic literature is usually written in this form and it is in the nation's psyche (The national canon/ቅኖኖ).
2. On the other hand it could be due to the fact works of fiction are referred to as "born from the heart", rather than the mind. Hence fictional writing is much more emotive and provokes feelings (hence the poetic language). This gives the reader the sense of finding his/her own story within the books and considers it to be a bio-fiction.

This is particularly true for most of the childhood incidents and stories in the book. Every child is bound to find at least one if not more of his/her own childhood experience in the book. For example, the incident in the second chapter, የቢሽፍቱ ልጆች ጥላምት, where the narrator and his friends are thrown 'white bread' by the Ferenjis and whereby the narrator finds it irresistible to taste but also finds it goes against his upbringing and morale to be eating a piece of bread thrown at him by a stranger. I for one clearly remember feeling extremely guilty and bad for taking food from a stranger (without parent's knowledge) when offered to me as a child? This is a no, no in our society and if somehow parents or elders of the household of the child who accepts food from strangers find out, the child is in trouble and told off severely if not punished for it. The feeling of (unnecessary) guilt as a child and adolescent which transcends into adulthood is vividly depicted - but not in a gloomy but rather in a more profound way.

3. The author further explains the use of "I" in Amharic literature and narration. For me the fact that the story is being narrated in the first person, I, seems to resonate more towards giving it a feeling of it being auto-biographical. This however does not mean the story is that of the author – rather it is a story born from the author's heart and is being told from the narrator's perspective.

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The repossession of a church building that has been converted into a restaurant/bar, where the narrator meets up with a long lost friend in the chapter ፍትፍት እና ደጃ ሰላም (pg. 167) is a poignant part of the political narration. The political climate of the Dergue era is captured in the book as if it were a time capsule. The narrator is a passionate, idealistic young man during this time of change and political turmoil soon after the 1973 revolution which overthrew the Monarchy. The dream of building a so called Socialist People's Republic of Ethiopia was tarred with gruesome in-fighting and blood-shed of the Red-terror and White-terror campaigns. The narrator finds himself on the opposing side, firstly of his first love, Sara - whom he named Belen, then many more of his friends.

The last chapter in the book is a depiction of the future – the year 2075, where indigenous crops have become extinct; climate change has clearly materialized; towns and cities are extremely overpopulated. Political ideologies and divisions are drawn on seemingly trivial but prevalent issues (in this case on bodily hair, especially on women). This brings to mind present day political divisions based on race and class. The footnotes by the author give superb insight into his prediction and depiction of the future. The language used in this chapter is slightly different, as it has evolved in time (in keeping with the whole consistency of narration) and some of the

examples and word creation are extremely insightful (dare I say genius). To have read a nationally treasured romantic novel by Haddis Alemayehu, ፍቅር እስከ መቃብር, would also give this chapter more significance and meaning to the reader (as most Ethiopians would have).

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Although on the whole Yewesdal Menged, Yametal Menged can be considered a typically Ethiopian book, the themes go beyond the political climate of the Dergue era and beyond. It probes into universal themes of marriage, child-hood, betrayal, romance, love, religion, life in foreign land and much more. The description of the different types of marriage experiences and especially what it actually means to be in love, be married and lose that as in the chapter አሕዛብ ማድ ቤት በር ላይ (ከነቃርሚያው) (pg. 355) as well as the many more other themes narrated in the book are a clear demonstrations this book is timeless and universal.

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There are lots of golden nuggets to be found all over the book. My golden quote is: “አገሮች ግን ልጆቻቸውን ከፍቅር መለያያ ጥበብ አላቸው” (pg. 214) – “Countries have a way of separating their children who are in love (from love).” This is especially true about the Dergue era and generations since, including my own. Multitudes of young and old leaving their country to live aboard in search of a better life and on occasions forced to do so for political reasons.

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And what of the mysterious but rather symbolic black hawk that keeps on appearing at significant junctures of the book?

And what indeed of a speck of dust? Or dust roads?

And what of the symbolic significance of the handkerchief /and that of the scarf?

And what of the symbolic significance of the nose bleed as a child and the snotty noses in final chapter?

And what of what draws the line to be an issue of differing/conflicting political ideologies?

There are clearly much more analyses and studies that could be done on this book.

This is a mere reflection of my feelings having read and re-read this book and I highly recommend it for everyone to read.