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Ethiopian Creative Writing and Criticism in English
A Review and Bibliography

Fekade Azeze

1. Introduction

In this work, Ethiopian creative writing in English is taken to mean creative writings by Ethiopians in English. Such works include poems, short stories, plays and novels. Translations from Amharic into English are included since Amharic is the language, compared to many other Ethiopian languages, in which much creative writing is produced. The paper does not, however, include translations from other Ethiopian languages into English as these cover the various translations of the rich Geez literature, and the oral literature in the large number of Ethiopian languages. This paper also contains critical views and reviews on the creative literature in English.

2. Sources

The main sources for this bibliography are the Catalogues of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies library; local magazines and journals: Something, Yekatit, Addis Reporter, Menen, Ethiopia Mirror, Link and Ethiopia Observer; the weekly, and later, the daily English newspaper, The Ethiopian Herald; foreign journals: Zuka, Topic, African Arts, Presence Africaine; A.J. Shelton's (ed.) The African Assertion; A Critical Anthology of African Literature for some of Tsegaye's poems; and David F. Beer's "Ethiopian literature and literary criticism in English: An annotated bibliography" for an entry on Dagnachew Worku which was published in Confluence (Missouri).

The first issue of Menen appeared on November 2, 1955, and until 1958 it was written in Amharic except for a bilingual Amharic-English edition published in 1957. In January 1958 it became a bilingual publication and stayed as such for the next four years. Since 1962, however, the bilingual magazine split into two independent magazines, the English version continuing until 1968. Though it was established about the same time as Black Orpheus in Nigeria, Menen remained an illustrated magazine abound with photographs. However, after 1964, interest in the arts flickered. Some articles on music, painting and painters, reviews etc., began to appear. In 1965 the first collection of poems in English by an Ethiopian writer appeared. (1) Menen did not continue this tradition until the publication of its last issue in December 1968.

Addis Reporter, a weekly magazine which succeeded Menen, first appeared on January 3, 1969. This issue contained two articles: Solomon Deressa's, a poet and critic, "The Dime Novel" - a critical evaluation of Amharic novels - and an article on the Creative Arts Centre of the then Haile Sellassie University (now Addis Ababa University). Although it was a promising beginning for literature and the arts, the contents of Addis Reporter continued to be overwhelmingly dominated by news coverage, commentaries, "View from Arat Kilo", (2) current events etc. Very few works pertaining to literature and the arts were published. The last issue of Addis Reporter appeared in July 1970.

Ethiopia Mirror, whose first issue was published in 1961, stated in its preface, "...in the present issue and in those which follow, we will endeavour to illustrate the traditions, customs, arts, events, and all the manifold aspects of Ethiopia."(3) All the issues were filled with photographs as promised. There was very little writing. The contribution of this quarterly magazine, published by the Ministry of Information, to the development of literature is meagre.

Though mainly a journal of academic nature, Ethiopia Observer has contributed to Ethiopian literature by publishing two of Tsegaye's plays, "Azmari" and "Tewodros", and some of his poems; two translations of small-sized Amharic novels; a translation of an Amharic short story, and the translated version of Mengistu Lamma's play, "Snatch and Run or Marriage by Abduction."

Most important contributions were made by The Ethiopian Herald and Something, the literary magazine of The University College. The Ethiopian Herald started coming out on July 3, 1943 as a weekly, and became a daily publication in English since December 29, 1958. Though a publication of the Ministry of Information, this newspaper has published and is still publishing poems, short stories and articles of varying quality and standard. It also held a literary contest in 1961 under the title "the Beauty of Ethiopia" and published eleven of the pieces submitted from March 29, 1961 to April 25, 1961. Six of the authors were Ethiopians, the rest five were foreign nationals.

Something was established in 1962. The inaugural issue was dedicated to the dethroned late emperor; the fourth issue (1965) to Queen Elizabeth II and the fifth (1966) to Chinua Achebe "whose work is a challenge and an inspiration to all young African writers."(4) Rosaline Ike's article on "Tragedy and Social Purpose: the Novels of Chinua Achebe" was published in this issue.

The third issue (1964) published nine short stories. These were the winning short stories by Abebe Semegn, the second by Berhane Maskal, the three short stories of three writers which shared the third prize, and four other stories that "narrowly missed" prizes. Thirty stories were submitted for the contest organized by the magazine.

Three articles on African literature and Pan-Africanism appeared consecutively in No.4 (1965), No.5 (1966) and No.6(1967). The publications in Something, however, dominantly comprise poems, short-short stories, and short stories. It was the first literary journal in English that ever existed in the country and continued publication until 1968.

It is probable that the intensification of the Ethiopian Student Movement in the late sixties and the formation of USUAA (University Students Union of Addis Ababa) in 1967 and its paper Struggle may be among the factors that brought about the publication of Something to an end.

The discontent which followed the suspension of NEUES (the National Union of Ethiopian University Students) and USUAA "...along with their publications..."(5) in April 1968 is also another possible factor that had an impact on or influenced its termination. Link, a publication of the Institute of Language Studies, first published in 1979, is the only University magazine in English that came close to replacing Something. However, it vanished as a literary magazine of creative writing and criticism after the publication of

the second issue in 1980. Presently there is no journal that specializes in publishing creative works and literary criticism either in Amharic or English. The Ethiopian Herald, Yekatit and the Amharic daily newspaper, Addis Zemen are the two major champions which attempt to compensate for the absence of a literary journal in the country.

Yekatit, which started as a quarterly in March 1978, has published some articles on literature, short stories, poems, sketches, and a good collection of folktales and stories creatively re-told by Sebhat G. Egziabher. After having read Sebhat's recreated folktales, stories, wits and wisdom, etc., one really wonders why this writer whose use of the English language is probably the most lucid, clear, simple and beautiful of Ethiopian writers in English has not yet ventured to write and publish in English, a collection of short stories or a novel. One is tempted to suggest therefore that collecting his folk-tales, folk-wisdom and wits which appeared in Yekatit and publishing them in book form would be a worthwhile undertaking. Sebhat has, by the way, published a number of beautiful short stories in Amharic in various journals, and has three unpublished novels in Amharic.

3. Earlier Contributions.

Two early contributions that bear the phrase "Ethiopian literature in English" need to be briefly introduced here.

The first is Highland Mosaic: a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature in English compiled by Paul Huntsberger and published in 1973. Huntsberger's aim in preparing the anthology" has been to give prominence to Ethiopia's complex history and culture as reflected in its literature."(6) He fulfilled this purpose by preparing "an introductory survey of, and guide to, what has been printed in English."(7). And compiling an anthology of excerpts from the works he discussed. Included in his anthology are excerpts from the Royal Chronicles, which were mainly written in Ge'ez and later translated into English (and other European languages); creative works originally written in English by Ethiopians; some translations made from Amharic creative works into English, and translated versions of some oral literary pieces from some of the Ethiopian nationalities.

Although his effort is commendable it is a bit discomfoting to hear Huntsberger, who has been in Ethiopia for two years,(8) say "In making this collection I have attempted to review all the Ethiopian literature currently published in English."(9) He would have been overwhelmed had he gone, at least through the catalogue of the IES Library and searched for material that befits his definition of "Ethiopian literature in English". Huntsberger's anthology therefore is more of an introductory collection, which should be given credit for its "popularizing" intentions rather than for its specialized concern as "... a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature in English."

The second is David F. Beer's "Ethiopian literature and literary criticism in English: An annotated bibliography" published in Research in African Literatures, VI, 1 (Spring 1975). Beer states that his bibliography includes"... a. works of literary interest written in English by Ethiopians; b. English translations of works originally in an Ethiopian language; c. Criticism in English of written and oral literature."(10) Indeed, Beer's bibliography attempts to include creative works by Ethiopians in English. However, there are some significant number of creative works that were not

included. His entries of the oral literature are too few to give a true picture of what has been attempted in this area in English.(11) Since the criticism on the written and oral literature is also vast, it had to be dealt with separately as mentioned earlier in this work. Therefore, Beer's work, though a good beginning it is not limited to the creative works in English and criticism written on them. His inclusion of the translated works is useful since these publications along with the creative writings in English may offer wider perspectives into the nature of Ethiopian creative writing.

The present bibliography is more complete and specialized than David Beer's. However, some inevitable omissions may have been made inadvertently. Some volumes of journals, magazines and newspapers were not available in the libraries I visited. Since some of them have been taken for binding it was difficult to obtain them. Poor record keeping and cataloguing in some of our libraries were also some of the major obstacles faced in compiling this bibliography. It must also be noted here that it is possible that creative works and criticism published in literary journals abroad may be missing in this bibliography simply because our libraries do not subscribe to most of them. Finally, I must admit that this work would have been more useful had it been annotated like most of Beer's bibliography.

4. Criticism (12)

Of the few critical works listed in this bibliography three were on Tsegaye, two on Solomon, two on Sahle Sellassie, two on Dagnachew and another one each on Abe, Mengistu, and Sahle Sellassie. The most important critical study on Ethiopian literature in English so far is Debebe's M.A. Thesis. All the rest are short reviews and commentaries except Fekade's M.A. Thesis on the novels of Shale Sellassie. It is evident, therefore, that Ethiopian creative writing in English has not attracted the attention of critics. This is probably what provoked Sahle Sellassie to say, with some tone of bitterness, "Critics of African literature ignore us completely. To them 'African' means West African, especially Nigerian; East African, especially Kenyan; and South African...."(13) A brief word on Debebe's work would therefore be appropriate.

Debebe's thesis deals with all the novels in his first chapter; the poetry of Tsegaye, Solomon and Eyasu in his second, and the plays of Tsegaye and Abe in his third chapter. Since there is no collection of short stories published to date his work does not deal with short stories. His work does not include most of the poems and short stories entered in this bibliography. Moreover, his approach is not what one may call "developmental" or "evolutionary" i.e. a work dealing with the history of the English language in Ethiopia, and the gradual development of creative writing in it. He is, however, careful in handling the enormous material already at hand, and his insight into the works of individual writers has helped him to be fair in his evaluation and to come out with enlightening results.

Some of the novels have been found to be poor in characterization, "thinly-plotted" and ineffective in their portrayal of setting. Abe's use of language is severely and rightly criticized in more than two occasions. Debebe states, "Abe's language lacks refinement and maturity. He seems to think in Amharic while writing in English. His Amharic imposes itself wantonly on his English..."(14) It must quickly be added, however, that the results of this imposition did not produce a novel as beautiful as Arrow of God. Defend the Name is also described as a failure because the author fails " in his manipu-

English..."(14) It must quickly be added, however, that the results of this imposition did not produce a novel as beautiful as Arrow of God. Defend the Name is also described as a failure because the author fails "in his manipulation of the English language" and the artistic working out of his theme.(15)

Debebe's thesis correctly concludes that Dagnachew, Tsegaye and Sahle Sellassie "...handle the language/English/ with commendable efficiency and ease"(16) while Abe Gubegna and Wolde Haile "prove failures when it comes to using the language correctly, fittingly and beautifully." (17)

The Afersata and the Oda-Oak-Oracle are inclined in depicting the cultures of two Ethiopian nationalities while Defend the Name and Confession are political. Three other works: The Thirteenth Sun, The Savage Girl and Firebrands deal with social problems at home. The historical works concentrate on the dominant epochs in Ethiopian history. Tsegaye's Collision of Altars deals with the early part of the Axumite period, namely the 3rd and 6th centuries A.D., and his Tewodros with the "Zamana Masafint" (Era of the princes) of the nineteenth century; Abe Gubegna's Defiance is based on the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-41.

A few more words must be said about Tsegaye's poems. Tsegaye, who concentrated on the cultural alienation of the educated Ethiopian in his early Amharic plays, also deals, in his poetry in English, with the African predicament which is a sad result of colonialism, its economic ravages, its political brutality and its educational and cultural impacts in creating by and large "black-skin, white-mask" African elites. Debebe stresses that Tsegaye's poems dominantly deal with the conflict between the traditional and modern, the African and colonial, and the past and present.

Debebe concludes his thesis by describing the creative works in English as "experimental works that may have the way to better writings in the future..."(18) Though this is true for most of the works by Ethiopians, I believe, at least when compared with other African literatures written in English, the poems of Tsegaye and some of his plays; Dagnachew's and some of Sahle Sellassie's novels are more than "experimental". However, Ethiopian literature in English has a long way to go if it aims at producing writers of the calibre of Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka, La Guma, Meja Mwangi, etc. The reasons for this is attributable to linguistic and historical factors.(19)

In fact one can say that the teaching of English and Amharic in Ethiopian schools today largely ignores the relevance of literature in the teaching of language. Students are not encouraged to develop their sensitivity to literature and through it their awareness of the surrounding culture and other cultures thereby nurturing creativity and imagination in the formative years of their personality.(20)

The challenge by Amharic to replace English as a medium of instruction in the secondary schools is also another factor worth considering. Moreover the absence of a large reading public, and the laws of censorship, which also hindered the development of literature in the vernacular languages are the factors that led to the poor development of Ethiopian creative writing in English.

5. Prospects

Sahle Sellassie's reasons for writing in English in the past still seem to hold true for the novelist. He believes that "the English language is very rich and handy to deal with diverse concepts and subjects." (21) He also thinks that the number of readers for Amharic and English is the same. Therefore he finds it reasonable to write in English in order to reach the foreign audience and at the same time to avoid censorship if published abroad. Asked about his future intentions Shale Sellassie said, "English is the only medium I intend to use for many more days to come. When the need arises, I may translate some of my English works into Amharic." (22) He stated this four years ago, a year after the publication of his Firebrands, in 1979. Sahle Sellassie has since translated and published Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities into Amharic, and has written a novel in Amharic.

Tsegaye published his Oda-Oak-Oracle in 1965, to avoid censorship and press himself freely. He also thinks that writing in English brings "international renown easily than /sic/ Amharic would" (23) Since he believes the translation of his Amharic works into English will help him bring the culture, history and revolution in the country to the international fora he intends to embark on this work. By so doing he plans to tell "the fate of Africa" to Africans in English.

Dagnachew, like Sahle Sellassie, believes that writing in English will enlarge his audience. He confirms that he intends to continue writing in English in the future. In an interview with Debebe in 1980, Dagnachew stated that a novel, Doormat, "is being published abroad." (24) However there seems to be no trace of this work yet. If this is true, the first and last novel Dagnachew published in English remains to be The Thirteenth Sun which came out in 1973.

We shall conclude by quoting what Debebe has to say about the prospects of Ethiopian literature in English:

As long as stringent censorship is prevalent in the country and as long as Ethiopians have something to say artistically to the outside world, Ethiopian literature in English will continue to come forth, even if in lulls and at intervals. (25)

One should add, however, that unless substantial changes in the teaching of English language and literature in general are made, creative writing in English may have to rely more on the pens of the already known pioneer writers and their generation, and less on that of the secondary school and university students of today if one hopes to see something artistically worthwhile in the near future.

Reference and Notes

1. Since I was not able to find the issues from August 1962 - December 1964 this statement is true only as regards to those I was able to examine.
2. 'Arat Kilo' is the name of the vicinity where Addis Reporter had its office.
3. "Preface". Ethiopia Mirror, vol. 1, 1 (1961); 4.
4. Something, 5 (1965). On the inside cover page.
5. Legesse Lemma. "The Ethiopian Student Movement 1960-1974: A Challenge to the Monarchy and Imperialism." Northeast African Studies, 1, (1969), 34.
6. Paul Huntsberger Comp. Highland Mosaic: a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature in English. Ohio University Center for International Studies, Papers in International Studies, Africa Series, Ohio University, 1973, no. 19, p. xi.
7. Ibid.
8. Cosmo Pieterse, In his Preface to Highland Mosaic, p. V.
9. Ibid, p.8.
10. David F. Beer. "Ethiopian literature and literary criticism in English: an annotated bibliography." Research in African Literatures, VI, 1 (Spring 1975), p. 44.
11. See my "Ethiopian Oral Literature a preliminary review and bibliography." Mentioned in the introduction to this work. This paper was presented at the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Nov. 26-30/1984, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
12. I am, like Beer, using this term in its broadest sense. It embraces studies, articles, reviews, commentaries etc.
13. Sahle Sellassie B. Mariam. "Yegan Mebrat..." The Ethiopian Herald, October 20, 1974. p. 6. (One would agree with Sahle Selassie if he addressed his criticism to the 'critics of African literature' only for not paying attention to Ethiopian creative works in English. However, he equivocates when he also criticises them for not dealing with Ethiopian literature in general. The so called 'critics' and the bulk of criticism they produced mainly in the sixties and the seventies was devoted to the literature written in European languages. Criticism on Yoruba, Swahili, Zulu, Hausa, Amharic etc. literature was not their main concern.)
14. Debebe Seifu. Ethiopian literature in English. M.A. Thesis. Addis Ababa University, unpublished, p. 73.
15. Ibid, p. 87.
16. Ibid, p. 150.
17. Ibid, p. 151.
18. Ibid.
19. The material in this section is partly taken from my unpublished M.A. Thesis cited in the bibliography. See also Haile Gabriel Dagne. "Non-Government Schools in Ethiopia." in M.L.Bender

and others (eds), Language in Ethiopia, London: OUP, 1976. p. 366.; Bender, M.L. and others (eds.) Language in Ethiopia. pp. 189, 380-81; Alemu Eshete, "The Pre-war attempts to promote the use of the English language in the educational system of Ethiopia in place of French ". Ethiopian Journal of Education." Vol 6, 2(1974), pp. 67, 68, 84; Richard Pankhurst. "Historical Background of Education in Ethiopia." in Language in Ethiopia, pp. 315,318; Albert Gerard. Four African Literatures..., University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1971, p.318.

20. A good number of my literature students at the Addis Ababa University today have not only not read any of the renowned literatures of the world they have not even read the popular works of Haddis Alemayehu, Baalu Girma, Berhanu Zarihun in Amharic. They honestly admit they do not recognize the names Mangistu Lamma, a well known poet, and Tesfaye Gessesse, a famous actor, director and writer. This, I believe, is mainly because of the shortcomings of the language teaching material which disregards the humanistic and cultural aspects of language, and emphasizes more on teaching the rules of grammar, less on the development of skills through drills and much less on the teaching of language through literature.
21. Debebe, p. 152.
22. Ibid, p. 155.
23. Ibid, p. 153.
24. Ibid, p. 154.

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