

THE AESTHETIC OF DIFFERENT CONCERNS IN CONTEMPORARY ERITREAN POETRY

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Abstract

This paper explores aesthetic of different concerns in contemporary Eritrean Poetry and is based on the translated version of poems Who Needs a Story? Eritrea, like many other African nations, has a deep rooted oral poetic tradition, but written poetry is of a recent origin. Most of the poets were the part of Eritrean struggle for independence (1961-1991) and their poems reflect some of the most compelling aspects of this struggle and humbling realities of the present. The exploration of work by poets in Who Needs a Story? reveals their different concerns aesthetically. They have a varied body of work, with individuals having written many different kinds of poems covering a wide range of experience in war, peace, post-independence and in between. Each of the poems in Who Needs a Story? marks a distinct point in this spectrum of Eritrean experience. The Eritrean poets tailor the beauty of their work in a way that is agreeable to the tastes of aesthetes. Aestheticism believes that the impact of a work of art on the audience must be pleasure born of beauty. Everyone possesses a sense of beauty, but only the aesthete has the aptitude for tasting beauty. The contemporary Eritrean poetry is primarily concerned with the search for freedom, and giving expression to it. All aspects and dimensions of freedom are seen in it. The sentiment of freedom is present in contemporary Eritrean poetry not only as its life essence, but also as beauty. The three values of life—equality, freedom and solidarity—can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in contemporary Eritrean Poetry. The paper will look at the poems aesthetically that deal with the different concerns in contemporary Eritrean poetry.

Keywords- aesthetic, concerns, tailor.

*You've seen our country. Now you know why we want to be free.
The Ethiopians came, they bombed our villages, they slaughtered
our cattle and burned our children. Everything is burning now.
Even the stones are burning.*

—Mama Zeinab

The concept of beauty tends to revolve around the feelings of pleasure and empathy aroused by viewing the object. The pleasure and empathy generated by beauty concerns aesthetes. Artists have to tailor the beauty of their work in a way that is agreeable to the tastes of aesthetes. The preferences of aesthetes are important for the artist. Aestheticism believes that the impact of a work of art on the audience must be pleasure born of beauty. Every one possesses a sense of beauty, but only the aesthete has the aptitude for tasting beauty. A person is gifted with sensitivity. The ability to imagine beauty is the gift of high culture. In NG Chapekar's opinion, 'To experience beauty, a cultured mind, health and enthusiasm are necessary' (Chapekar, 66).

The aesthete is a product of circumstances. But in the process of taste, the aesthete is as important as the artist and the artistic creation. And this is why one must recognize that beauty-related experiences are object-specific, person-specific and situation-specific—there cannot be a general concept of beauty. However, the aesthetic of different concerns in contemporary Eritrean poetry has given primacy to the pleasure of aesthete.

If pleasure is the basis of aesthetics of White literature, reality and honesty is the basis of the aesthetics of contemporary Eritrean Poets. Will readers be distressed or angered, or will they be pleased by reading the reality and sacrifice expressed in contemporary Eritrean Poetry? It is an anthology that is intended to make readers conscious of the beauty and contribution of the poets for telling the actual odyssey of the Eritreans. How can the aestheticism in discussions of beauty be reconciled with this consciousness in contemporary Eritrean poetry? This revolutionary consciousness is based on ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity, rather than pleasure.

In every age, the imaginary of beauty is linked to prevailing ideas. At one time, for example, kings and emperors used to be the subject of literature. But today, the life lived in huts, cottages, and slums has been become the subject of literature. And it is so special in the context of contemporary Eritrean poetry. It has become necessary to transform the imaginary of beauty because it is not possible to investigate the creation of contemporary Eritrean poetry and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the framework of traditional aesthetics. Not only is contemporary Eritrean poetry new, its form and purpose too are different from those of the literature of whites. Therefore, it cannot be appraised using traditional aesthetics.

The contemporary Eritrean poetry is primarily concerned with the search for freedom, and giving expression to it. All aspects and dimensions of freedom are seen in it. We should remember that the imaginary or idea of freedom has an aesthetic aspect, as much as it has political, economic, social and moral facets. The sentiment of freedom is present in contemporary Eritrean poetry not only as its life essence, but also as beauty. The three values of life—equality, freedom and solidarity—can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in contemporary Eritrean Poetry.

Is it appropriate to expect pleasure or beauty, instead of inspiration for social transformation, from a literature that has been written primarily to raise awareness? We find that their poetry should be analyzed from a sociological perspective focused on social values than on beauty. Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a few and distinct aesthetic for their poetry—an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic. In other words, contemporary

Eritrean poets have demanded different yardsticks for the literary appraisal of their works. It is the firm conviction of Eritrean poets that if yardsticks change, the concept of aesthetics will change too.

Like many other countries Eritrean poetry, however belatedly, got its recognition. The Contemporary Eritrean poets began appearing in the first decade of the 21st century in some reputed literary journals like *Left Curve*, *Words Without Borders*, *Modern poetry in Translation*, etc. *Who Needs a Story*—an anthology of Contemporary Eritrean poetry like other nation's poetry is rich. Though Eritrean poets writing in their own languages or translation could not be found on the shelves of the world's bookstores and libraries but now Contemporary Eritrean poets are well on their way to being known and enjoyed throughout Africa and the world. Its journey for gaining acclaim and recognition is not less than an odyssey in itself. The exploration of work by poets in *Who Needs a Story* reveals their different concerns aesthetically. They have a varied body of work, with individuals having written many different kinds of poems covering a wide range of experience in war, peace, post-independence and in between. Each of the poems in *Who Needs a Story* marks a distinct point in this spectrum of Eritrean experience.

Though classical poetry is powerful in creating imagery and it contains flowery language. Mostly it talks about morality and philosophy. It remains strict to the form. The poems provide the utmost pleasure of reading. They are impregnated with mellifluous words. But modern poetry, especially in the context of Eritrean poetry, we witness that it is away from superficiality and gives a real description. It is a 'free verse' poetry at certain points. Even it is free from strict form of poetry as it used to be in the case of classical poetry. Most of the poems are woven from the first hand experiences of the poets. There is a natural flow of feelings in the poems. There is effortlessness in them. There is a healthy diversity of voices of which contemporary Eritrean poetry consists of. It ranges from what might be considered the pre-independence, mainstream poetry of resistance to post-independence—necessarily more innovative and critical. From the poems of battlefield to the poems of post-independence, there is an authentic account of different concerns aesthetically. The basic purpose of theirs is to acquaint the readers with the sordid realities of life. It seems that they call a spade a spade. Sometimes even the language used by them is crude. It is a sort of purge.

Let me begin with Reesom Haile—the vanguard of Contemporary Eritrean poetry. He offers a wide range of subjects in his poetry that has a global dimension—in his words, 'the indomitable struggle of humanity'. His achievement is doubly powerful and unique. The poetry of Reesom Haile reveals a joining of words and worlds from the perspective of the collective, the community, the society and the nation of which he is an integral part. He says:

*Poetry is not a special activity of poets, for everyone is a potential a poet.
Only that some people are more gifted than others in the art and their
words and words more memorable. The poem is not an object separate
and apart from its function: to ease the pain and to celebrate the pleasure
of life. Women and men alike express themselves in music and poetry
while at work or at play.*

Reesom Haile is a great literary figure. He is very realistic in his poetry. His language of self-determination and political self-determination produce a supreme poetry of resistance with confidence. There is depth in his poetry. His poem *Believe It or Not* is a superb example of his realistic approach. He shows his deep concern regarding colonialism.

*Remember the Italians
Who invaded and said*

.....
Don't speak and don't eat....
Believe it or not,
They want to kill us....

We have that is one of the most popular poems of post-independence Eritrea makes him a kind of rock star status. The poem extols a reputed essence of the Eritrean spirit: self-reliance, resistance, steadfastness, triumph, men and women, against all odds, working together:

We have men and women
Who sacrifice their lives.

.....
We have men and women
Without end in the struggle
To grow, study and persist.

The refrain in the poem '*We have men and women..../ We have women and men*' stresses the power of those who have lived through the war to change their society into a nation of peace, yet recognizing that the power of women makes them absolutely equal partners with men. Further, the poem affirms the presence of an informed and dedicated citizenry as avid to win the peace as it was to win the war. Unrelentingly in *We have* he implies that Eritrea's people are fully prepared to rule themselves and that no one should think they might not be.

Who Said Merhawi Is Dead by Solomon Drar is one of the important poems in this anthology. The refrain 'Who Said Merhawi is dead', insists that the spirit of war never halts. The pun on 'Merhawi' suggests a perpetually embattled spirit—he is always ready for armed struggle. The profound, mythopoic image of the blossoming bed, later admired by Drar's joining the heroic vision of Merhawi to the Eritrean present—

Working together
Like water and milk
And a perfect fit
of hand and glove....

-barely conceal a perpetually warlike and restless spirit. Such images enhance the beauty. In one of the parts of the poem Drar's organic imagery of rotting fruit suggests that if a revolution merely follows its natural course 'corruption' may even be inevitable without the more dire perspective that the poem recommends. Nevertheless, Eritrea's war poetry—be it totally about war or of war and peace conjoined-repeatedly takes an Horatian and/ or Homeric stance on war, unflinchingly and profligately violent yet ultimately without regret if it serves the cause of Eritrean nationalism.

Speaking about the same concern another important poet Mussa Mohammed Adem introduces readers to *The Invincible* through a sort of psychological portrait:

he has that true killer look
And dirges play like soundtracks in his head...
constantly
Making him think, 'Encircle, attack, attack....'

Every stanza of the poem includes murder, mayhem and causalities. The violence is excessive and endless but also timeless. It is a heroic kind of poetry. It can allow no other focus than on war and violence itself. Even the goal of Eritrean independence seems subsumed amidst such violence and the overwhelming reality that 'until we see the Red Sea dry', only 'Invincible' determines 'life/ or death.' It is 'all that he', the poet or the reader is allowed to 'understand.'

The war shatters every other nuance. War, as one of the main concerns is aesthetically depicted in *The Invincible* that further justifies the appropriateness of the title too. For an ordinary reader it may look merely war imagery but for an aesthete it is more than that.

Woman of Eritrea by Kajerai gives a beautiful description about the Eritrean women soldiers. He breaks the traditionality. He purges them from being passive, powerless, domestic, and long suffering victims. Kajerai's *Woman of Eritrea* can always be counted on for 'high spirits and passion.' The poet even considers an Eritrean female soldier to be stronger than a male fighter since she outlines him and goes on fighting. Moreover, the poet seems to revel in the violence and abject conditions as the other poets portray.

There are poets who tell their story involving war but also a revelation of peace. One of them is Isayas Tsegai. He offers the irrepressible voice of a poet: a voice that for him is identity as to his being 'an Eritrean.'

The wind wanted my bones...

I wished I was never born...

He focuses on an individual's destruction and, in an intimidating stroke of brutal psychological honesty, his or her self-destruction, too, be it justifiable or not. Moreover, the poet even sees himself 'embrace' such 'suffering,' whatever its outcome.

Tsegai talks about the sordid reality of war. He decides to confront with the poem's warlike yet peace-loving refrain: 'clenching my teeth, I said it again...// *I am also a person. I am an Eritrean.*' It echoes in the wasteland of war; in starvation, in the thirst of the dying, in the blasted and poisoned earth and in whatever one imagines as an afterlife. The poet is deeply considered with peace and the futility of war. He remembers happier times before the war:

Birds in the swaying tree...

The rhythm of sea

.....

And devoted to good work.

I loved this country.

The poet begins the reclamation of an Eritrean identity buoyed by prosperity and self-assurance in addition to merely grim self-determination. He offers the irrepressible voice of a poet: a voice that for him is identical to his being 'an Eritrean.' Recalling when he 'ate and dressed well' and 'want...[ing] it back,' he humanizes such an image and through his language frees it and himself from mere tragedy as a subject of pity and fear. By writing *Lamentation* that is an elegy, the poet touches the height of bleakness. He posits the starkest of insights and simply the truth about an Eritrean individual who also happens to be a poet and a friend of a dead soldier. His passion for his lost friend consumes him and transforms him totally:

pray to be the soil

Of the shrine and hold his body

.....

Burn only with his memory....

Questions of life or death, the state or the individual, the religious or the revolutionary no longer matter. Instead, the poet would return to his origins as a human being and as a poet. He becomes too much pessimist that he wants to escape from reality. 'Is this the promised end?' he asks it to himself. Despondently, he finds the solution:

I thought I knew which way was best

But now I want to runaway

And hide in a monastery

Unlike the greatest elegies, a contemporary Eritrean elegy cannot promise much more than ‘hope’ and ‘dreams’.

El-Sheik (Madani) is a poet deeply concerned with ‘corrupt politics’. Evoking the failure of the political process that led to the war in the first place, he is a true believer in the goals of the revolution and a new era in which it is not betrayed. No one ever again should be fooled by the old ways of politics as usual with both sides paid, double deals, mere self-interest and power exercising nothing but corruption. Instead, he envisions a thoroughly redemptive political process succeeding after the revolution and banishing whatever failures of nerve and ideals that led up to it:

*No more rooms of our dreams gone up
 In the smoke of self-perpetuating
 Politicians pretending
 They will back our cause.*

The very tone of despondency is quite visible in the poem *A Candle in the Darkness* written by Ghirmai Ghebremeskel. It opens with war’s absurdity and near madness, fomenting a kind of hysterical desire to be a part of it. He begins by challenging a volunteer ‘Fight for freedom?/ You want to fight for freedom/Because you love this country...?’ The poet’s incredulity at the paradox of a deliberate decision to fight for peace is clearly audible, except to the volunteer who, drunk on his or her idealism, ‘only want(s) to drink freedom.’ The poet here is very much concerned with ‘vision of peace.’

Whereas Ghebremeskel envisions the brightest of futures, Angessom Isaak is remembering the past that in comparison resembles ‘The one and only true/ color of freedom.’ The poem *Freedom’s Colors* stands as one of Eritrea’s greatest post-war poems for its personal and powerful expression of doubt: self-doubt on the part of the poet as well as doubt in what the Eritrean victory has accomplished. For Isaak, bravery in a new, post-war political light can be realized precisely through doubt and an honest questioning of self and country. Such a stance questions the viability or usefulness of the individual romantic poet. He becomes more content in addressing the frustrated and humbling realities of the present rather than the wild and heroic expectations of the past. Wondering why his vision of Eritrea changes, he becomes more honest than ever, answering ‘I don’t know why.’ The poetic achievement of *Freedom’s Colors* reveals no absence of artistic delight in contemplating the nature of freedom and democracy in contemporary post-independence Eritrea.

*But freedom shines less now.
 The colors run into each other.
 I can’t see one color alone.
 I don’t know why,
 And never could I have imagined
 My vision ending like this: black,
 Blacker than a crow’s eye.*

The poem reveals a profound awareness. It depicts the poet’s deep concern. He cites Keats’s poetic dictums “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

Fortuna Ghebregiorgis is one of the few female poets in contemporary Eritrean poetry. She explains that she has one battlefield and that is her psyche. A kind of inner violence stalks her work akin to the power of Emily Dickinson’s dire meditations on self. Psychomachia or spiritual warfare is her concern. In *Help Us Agree*, she strikes the rarest of private notes in

Eritrean poetry. Since poetry is a very public art, widely practiced and appreciated in Eritrea, most poems feature less private and less embarrassing frankly insecure moments than her portrayal of someone engaged for an existential moment of reflection on her shadow. Looking into her self as well as at the world around her, all she sees is strife. The first stanza of her poem clearly states her position:

*When will my shadow
 And I agree?
 Why won't it obey?
 Whenever I wear colors
 Darkness comes back at me.*

Really the writers are highly sensitive human beings. Everything that happens all-around has perfect imprint on their attitude and process of thinking. They are the representative of their time as they give an outlet to the fears, emotions, beliefs, customs, weaknesses, vices, morality, hopes, aspirations, etc. of that particular era in which they live and write. They showcase the society as it is. And Eritrean poets are no exceptions in this regard. They feel free and are able to describe what they witness: the sordid realities of life. Saba Kidane performs her poetry and displays the exuberance confidence by sketching what she sees around in post-war Eritrea. Really she comes up with deep understanding. She sees children growing older, boys and girls flirting and poor women begging in Asmara's streets. She makes them as autonomous poetic subjects that need not be tied to or contextualized within explicit nationalistic or political concern.

Go Crazy Over Me portrays a situation that is normal and unremarkable nearly everywhere in the world. The poet moves effortlessly, adapting the voice of the prospective male seducer.

*Take off those clothes
 What do you have to lose?*

She naturally develops such relatively artless, sexy if superficial and fatalistic comments into psychological, political and philosophical insights. *Your Father* by the same poet showcases that poverty is the hardest reality to bear. Begging on Eritrea's streets may be discouraged and sometimes even denied as even happening, but it is an inevitable reality there as in most cities of the world. The poet sketches the mother in painstaking, even loving detail as if her body is itself a kind of living battlefield and female microcosm of the Eritrean struggle, haunted by heroism but facing despair. The woman has no choice but to try, seemingly against all odds.

*Propped on the sidewalk
 With a few coins near her legs
 And a child wrapped in the folds
 of her scarf worn to shreds,
 She holds out her hand in the cold.*

The poem, moreover, might as easily be applied to patriarchy itself or to the government of the country—yet any country—allowing for a society in which a woman can be left in such circumstances with no other alternative than to beg. The poet highlights a mother's special, spontaneous sense of the moment. The pain she (mother) feels for her son as well as for herself is too overwhelming.

Focusing on the inevitability of love and romance, Hailemariam's *Let's Divorce and Get Married Again* picks up the oft told, universal story of men and women at different point. Here the poet delineates the lustrous early days of a marriage wearing off to reveal an irresolvable

incompatibility between two people that ends in divorce. The poet makes young husband the poem's speaker and constructs a manic, poetic, idealistic, naïve, self-centered if not wholly culpable or unusual persona.

*rising like the star
 The wise men saw
 You overcame my fear
 And I bowed to your light.*

Such a presentation inescapably implies that solely emphasizing the husband's perspective on the relationship reveals the root of why it falls apart. Based on the evidence of the poem, the couple seem to have little choice but to continue their struggle and hope for the best, despite the wreckage—in their case, emotional—piling up around them, a little like the Eritrean nation itself. In this regard the poem can be read as a political allegory too.

The associative, the surreal and a distinct lack of reality lead Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh to discover 'the power of revolution'. He finds the spirit of the 'revolution' not in obvious military exploits or extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice but in opaque poetic images. He makes his erotic obsession not the problem but the solution by shifting his focus from himself to the natural world around him. The poet reveals that he has been compelled to fantasize sexually about her beloved:

*confused and wanting you
 Bathed in juicy colors
 We fall on each other
 And I bathe like a hero
 In your body full of desire....*

There are many a grim concerns that one of the greatest icons Ghirmai Yohannes (San Diego) in *Who Needs a Story* deals with. His poem *Like a Sheep* is the best succinct in this regard. It focuses on a casualty of emigration. Those who flee their beloved Eritrea for the hope of getting into materialistic gains in another country are led blithely like sheep to a new place:

*Led with a rope around his neck,
 He blindly followed the trader
 And the butcher and blithely thought
 Of grazing in a new country.*

It is a con game of human traffickers who entice the innocent people. Here the poet sounds sardonic. His objectivity allows his poem to attain a kind of universal description of the perils of an illegal immigrant. In this way neither place recognizes him, and he seems unable to recognize either place. Unlike Yeats, San Diego wants no 'story' of Eritrean myth or politics through which to project his own poetic concerns. He is absolutely implicit in dealing with the concerns. Throughout the poem the message that he wants to convey to the people gets its importance. And it keeps the tone of the poem objective.

Next Time Ask by the same poet presents a similarly mordant voice, only its acerbic attitude encompasses not merely the sorry plight of illegal immigrants but the entire range of human endeavour. The very first stanza of the poem is quite scathing:

*One fact won't go away.
 Tomorrow or today
 You have to know you die.
 Don't think of asking why.*

Here San Diego reveals the ultimate folly of human rationality and its pretensions. The tone of the poem suggests that the poet's wish is fatuous but the logic of his poem concludes that the vanity of human wishes to escape by any means the lot of our fellow creatures and anything alive is even more fatuous. The poem punctures humanity's pride in its own accomplishments. The poet wants his readers to contemplate some of life's most basic questions about human survival. His purpose is not simply to amuse, but to instruct the people and to save them if possible from a fiery future. He is not an allegorist merely playing with ideas and conceits.

Conclusively, it can be said that the contemporary Eritrean poets have taken and discussed different concerns aesthetically. They have been succeeded in tailoring the beauty of their work in a way that is agreeable to the tastes of aesthetes. The sordid reality of life that they speak out implicitly achieves its deep concern.

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