

# FILM REVIEW

**Aälām-Wārqe Davidian, director. *Fig Tree*.** 2018. 93 minutes. Amharic. Black Sheep Film Productions, Av Medien Penrose, En Compagnie Des Lamas. Distributed by Menemsha Films. No price reported.

*Fig Tree*, Aälām-Wārqe Davidian's debut film, depicts the sociopolitical trauma of Ethiopia's Derg period through the story of Beta Israel, an ancient community of Jews who lived in Ethiopia for centuries in isolation from the rest of the Jewish world and who have multi-pronged identity narratives. Tagged as "others" at times, but also with a strong sense of belonging to both Ethiopian and Israeli societies, Beta Israel has had little cinematic representation. *Fig Tree* is therefore unique among the many other films about Ethiopia's revolutionary history such as Haile Gerima's *Teza* (2008) and Salem Mekuria's *Deluge* (1997). This film is an intense representation of the political realities of this period percolated through the love story of Mina and Eli, which makes the film both individually and communally relatable.

*Fig Tree* explores the dilemma of Mina, a sixteen-year-old Ethiopian Jewish girl, who becomes increasingly resistant to her family's plan to leave Ethiopia for Israel because she is determined not to leave until she has rescued her Christian boyfriend Eli from being drafted into the Derg regime's army. Mina's deep love for Eli and her struggle to take him with her to Israel leads her to take the extreme measure of losing her virginity to him so they could be considered husband and wife. Her position was certainly unusual for her age, but the narrative offers a highly nuanced portrait of Beta Israel's lived experience.

The film begins with an intertitle that describes the oppressive sociopolitical condition in Ethiopia during the Derg regime, and how the youth were being persecuted, leading many Ethiopians, including Ethiopian Jews, to flee the country. This intertitle serves as an intersection for both historical and dramatic representations of the period; it establishes real political contexts of space and time as background for individual love stories which, although they may appear less important and inequitable to the societally experienced trauma of the period, are nonetheless worth telling. The film then opens with a shot of a tree, captured from an extremely low angle of the

sky, which smoothly transitions into a shot of Mina's back while she is chopping wood. She places her head on the chopped wood and looks up at the sky.

Then, the camera cuts to an unsettling discussion between Mina's grandmother, her neighbor (Eli's mother Salitu), and a female agent about migrating to Israel as Beta Israel; this segment explores Mina's grandmother's unwavering desire to take Salitu and Eli with her to Israel by having them assume Jewish names while secretly remaining Orthodox Christians. Davidian's story, imagery, and music reveal Mina's love for her Orthodox friends at school and her grandmother's relationship with the Orthodox community, as she makes traditional Orthodox Christian "Habesha" apparel that is admired by all. The film unpacks the peaceful co-existence and interrelationships, the realities that the Beta Israel community has shared even in tumultuous times and places, such as 1989 in Addis Ababa, the film's setting.

The historical context for the film is when Israel's authorities attempted to persuade Ethiopia's head of state, Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam, to allow Beta Israel to leave, which eventually led to an agreement to facilitate Jewish emigration beginning in 1991 through various operations. The film also highlights Beta Israel's marginalization in Ethiopia. In one scene, Mina and her Orthodox Christian girlfriend meet an elderly man to deliver the clothing that her grandmother has made. Mina scares the children in the house by making a frightening face, prompting one of them to call her "Buda," an Amharic term for the conception of the evil eye and a derogatory term for Ethiopian Jews, who were referred to as hyena people.

The symbolism of the fig tree is established from the beginning of the film. The epitome of this is a scene when Mina is followed by a fast-moving hand-held camera in search of Eli through a school whose serene environment has abruptly morphed into a chaotic scene as young boys are being kidnapped to become soldiers. We see some young boys escaping as quickly as they can, while the captured ones beg to be let go with tears in their eyes. We see Mina asking students about Eli; we see her getting into the vehicle that has kidnapped young boy students; and we follow her to the fig tree, where she eventually finds Eli and they enjoy a moment together. The fig tree serves as a safe haven for Eli, as he uses it both as a hiding place from the military junta and as a meeting place to be with Mina.

In interviews, Davidian has explained that she was one of the Beta Israelis who fled to Israel as a very young girl. In the film, she explores the memories of her childhood and of the close families in her neighborhood, Shola, which translates to "fig" in English; this is the place in Addis Ababa where she grew up, and where she returned every year to enjoy the camaraderie that existed among her relatives who lived there after she migrated to Israel. Though the film can be considered to be driven by Davidian's own personal memory of her childhood, its sophisticated

storytelling speaks to the audience through a complex weaving together of love, belonging, unrest, and history.

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