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# Haddis Alemayehu’s Vision of the Old World: Literary Realism and the Tragedy of History in the Amharic Novel *Fikir iske Mekabir*

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## Abstract

Haddis Alemayehu’s classic novel *ፍቅር እስከ ሞቃብር* (*Fikir iske Mekabir*, *Love until Death*, 1958 Ethiopian Calendar, 1965/6 Gregorian Calendar), is lauded by critics as a pioneering realist and modern novel in the Amharic literary tradition. My aim in this article is to scrutinize this take by examining the novel’s narrative temporalities and modes through a dialectical lens. This leads me to argue that the novel’s realism is marked by contradiction and fluidity. Specifically, the emergence of realism in *Fikir iske Mekabir* is accompanied by its breakdown while the realist narrative mode is accompanied by the traditional narrative modes of epic and hagiography (or, *gedl*). This hitherto unexamined textual and intertextual quality of Haddis’s novel reveals new insights into its thematic content regarding modernity, tradition, and social reproduction under the old Ethiopian order.

**Keywords:** realism; epic; *gedl*; hagiography; fate; narrative time; narrative mode; social reproduction; modernity; tradition

## Introduction

Haddis Alemayehu’s classic *ፍቅር እስከ ሞቃብር* (*Fikir iske Mekabir*, *Love until Death*, 1958 Ethiopian Calendar, 1965–1966 Gregorian Calendar)<sup>1</sup> is viewed as a pioneering “realist” Amharic novel. This reception, however, is animated by the ideological purpose of affirming the novel’s status as “modern” and (therefore) consequential in Amharic literary history, thereby misreading its fluid and contradictory deployment of realism. Studying these two hitherto unappreciated narratological qualities, in turn, reveals new insights into the novel’s

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<sup>1</sup> These years of publication are obtained from Reidulf Molvaer, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia’s Literary Giants and Pioneers* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1997), 146.

thematic treatment of a traditional African social order and its encounter with modernity.<sup>2</sup>

Fikre Tolossa, for instance, identifies the novel (henceforth referred to as *FM*) as the first realist Amharic novel.<sup>3</sup> He backs his claim by citing the novel's individualized portrayals of characters,<sup>4</sup> detailed descriptions of place and events,<sup>5</sup> and plausible trajectories in the plot<sup>6</sup> as evidence for its realism or lack thereof.<sup>7</sup> However, this claim is maintained by ignoring the aspects of the novel associated with allegory, mystery, irrevocability, and the miraculous. Unfortunately, such realist readings of the novel are so common that they dominate the work of even those critics who are not explicitly concerned with the novel's realism.<sup>8</sup> Further, this assumption leads critics to disparage the novel's tragic ending as implausible and therefore as insufficiently realist, indicative of the author's traditionalism.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, previous theoretical readings of *FM*'s realism show a lack of critical focus on questions regarding realism's tensions and contradictions, not to mention realism's mimetic validity and its ideological/aesthetic desirability. Indeed, such questions feature prominently in postcolonial scholarship, including but not limited to those with a post-structuralist leaning (see, for instance, Gikandi's<sup>10</sup> discussion of realism in African/postcolonial literary history).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the ironic implications of using narrative modes originating in modern Europe to depict a traditional African society for an African readership are not considered in Fikre's approach, ignoring the sensibilities of a public whose literary taste may be molded by traditional "genres [such as] the royal chronicle [and] the gädl."<sup>12</sup>

Revisiting the complicated issue of *FM*'s realism, in addition to bringing us closer to the text, can, therefore, help achieve insightful comparative perspectives that

<sup>2</sup> *FM* is the first part of a trilogy that explores the history of the traditional Ethiopian order in the modern era. Its temporal setting is from the beginning of the 1900s into the early 1930s, the first years of Emperor Haile Selassie I's reign. Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 147.

<sup>3</sup> Fikre Tolossa, "Realism in Haddis Alemayehu," in *Silence Is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*, ed. Tadesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrence, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 123.

<sup>4</sup> Fikre, "Realism in Haddis Alemayehu," 124, 126.

<sup>5</sup> Fikre, "Realism in Haddis Alemayehu," 131.

<sup>6</sup> Fikre, "Realism in Haddis Alemayehu," 133.

<sup>7</sup> Such readings of *FM*'s realism rely on Ian Watt's categories, as proposed in his classic of literary criticism *The Rise of the Novel*.

<sup>8</sup> Taye Assefa, "Form in the Amharic Novel" (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 1986), 149, 170 (<https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00029398>).

<sup>9</sup> Fikre, "Realism in Haddis Alemayehu," 133–34.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Gikandi, "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," *Modern Language Quarterly* 38.3 (2012).

<sup>11</sup> More recent scholarly work even reassesses concepts such as implausibility, seeing them as not antithetical to but constitutive of realism in works of African fiction. See, for instance, Eleni Coundouriotis, "Improbably Figures: Realist Fictions of Insecurity in Contemporary African Fiction," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49.2 (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Taye Assefa and Shiferaw Bekele, "The Study of Amharic Literature: An Overview," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 33.2 (2000): 48.

relate Amharic literature with literatures and critical debates from elsewhere on the continent and beyond, something I attempt in the following by exploring parallels between *FM* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in relation to their authorial and narrative perspectives.

I mainly take advantage of two theorists' concepts in making my argument: Jameson's conceptualization of realism and destiny as well as Irele's ideas of double perspective of point of view and unfreedom. I examine the internal contradictions of *FM*'s realism by drawing on Fredric Jameson's dialectical argument that realism is a consequence of the tension between what he terms as "destiny versus the eternal [/scenic] present": "what is crucial is not to load one of these dies and take sides for the one or the other as all theorists seemed to do, but rather to grasp the proposition that realism lies at their intersection ... to resolve the opposition either way would destroy it." He adds that "this is also why it is justified to find oneself always talking about the emergence or the breakdown of realism and never about the thing itself, since we always find ourselves describing a potential emergence or a potential breakdown."<sup>13</sup> My aim here is to primarily focus on the temporal aspect of Jameson's formulation of realism, the temporal opposition between "the tripartite temporal system of past-present-future" (read destiny) and the "present,"<sup>14</sup> the idea that realism comes into being in "the symbiosis of this pure form of storytelling [of the *récit*] with impulses of scenic elaboration, description and ... affective investment."<sup>15</sup> Although Jameson's study focuses on European literary traditions, his theorization is highly relevant for our purposes here because of his dialectical mode of inquiry,<sup>16</sup> coupled with his incorporation of important concepts of narrative temporality such as destiny and how such concepts contribute to a better understanding of realism's emergence and breakdown, concepts that are central for a deeper narratological understanding of *FM*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso Books, 2015), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 10–11.

<sup>16</sup> Jameson illustrates his dialectical method by stating that "it is the dialectical formulation that which, taken as an image of thought rather than a philosophical proposition in its own right ... [that] strikes me as the most suggestive," evoking the images of "the strands of DNA winding tightly about each other or a chemical process in which the introduction of a fresh reagent precipitates a fresh combination which then slowly dissolves again as too much of the element in question is added" (10). However, I find Marx's use of the image of an ellipse as more suggestive: "It is a contradiction to depict one body as constantly falling towards another at the same time constantly flying away from it. The ellipse is a form of motion within which this contradiction is both realized and resolved." Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1990), 198. This image, by using the concept of motion, shows that the dialectical method (used by Marx and by me in this paper) is not about thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (i.e., about ultimately resolving contradictions) as some would have it. Rather, this (moving) image shows that "contradictions are never finally resolved; they can only be replicated either within a perpetual system of movement ... Yet there are apparent moments of resolution." David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2010), 62.

<sup>17</sup> This is as sensed but left undeveloped in Fikre's assessment of the novel's tragic ending as implausible. Indeed, Fikre is not only troubled by what he sees as the implausibility of the plot's ending but by the tragic ending itself, an ending that indeed does seem bleak and fatalistic, where Gudu Kassa (and hence the hope of a different future) and, more generally, all the main characters die. Fikre, "Realism in Haddis Alemayehu," 133–34.

In addition to using Jameson's theory to understand the contradiction between destiny versus the scenic present that inheres in *FM*'s realism, I contend that *FM* deploys the realist narrative mode in contradictory unity with the traditional epic and hagiographic/*gedl* narrative modes. These internal as well as intertextual contradictory and interactive narrative processes, then, inform the novel's themes about the reproduction of individual and social life under the traditional order. I draw on F. Abiola Irele's concept of "double perspective of point of view"<sup>18</sup> to show that these oppositions regarding *FM*'s realism are a narratological working out of the tensions connected to the unfreedom of individuals and society under the traditional order. Irele uses his concept in his study of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to identify the thematic implications of the tensions involved in this novel's realism: "a double perspective of point of view is reflected in the narrative devices ... evident in what we have called the novel's diegetic function, which relates to the explicit realism associated with the genre, the imperative of representation to which it responds." He argues, "On one hand, it enables a positive image of tribal society to emerge, with its coherence and especially the distinctive poetry of its form of life." "On the other hand," he continues "we are made aware that this coherence is a precarious and even factitious one, deriving from an inflexibility of social norms that places an enormous psychological and moral burden on individuals caught up within its institutional constraints, imprisoned by its logic of social organization, and inhibited by its structure of social conformities." Irele further asserts that this occasions a split "within the writer's creative consciousness," which "makes for a profound ambivalence that translates as a productive tension in the novel's connotative substratum."<sup>19</sup>

Irele, then, enables us to complement the narratological perspective explained previously about the contradictions regarding *FM*'s realism, that is, realism's emergence and breakdown due to its internal contradictions as well as its intertextual relation with other narrative modes, with a sociological one. To what extent are the characters in *FM* "imprisoned" by the "institutional constraints" and the "logic of social organization" of (and here we replace "tribal" with) feudal<sup>20</sup> society? Are the tensions regarding *FM*'s realism a narratological processing of the tensions connected to the unfreedom of individuals and society in a traditional order on the cusp of change and, if so, how?

<sup>18</sup> F. Abiola Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," *African Studies Quarterly* 4.3 (2000): 15.

<sup>19</sup> Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," 15.

<sup>20</sup> I characterize the traditional Ethiopian order as feudal following Donald Crummey's use of the term to indicate that the tributary relation between the *gultegna* and *ristegna* (classes that feature in the novel) was not simply an administrative but also a property relation between two distinct classes engaged in a constant process of class struggle. Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000), 8–12.

My approach, by integrating the sociological with a strong narratological perspective, avoids the reductionism that Yonas Admasu calls the “documentalist approach” to Amharic/African literature, an approach that treats “fictional works ... as nothing more than sources for sociological data ... [ignoring how and why] the respective authors of the various fictional works weave these ‘social facts’ into the fabric of the narratives qua narrative.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, such an integrated approach is highly appropriate for Haddis’s work, which bridges the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, poetics and politics, as shown later.

### The Tragedy of Life

“And as I fled I reached the very spot where the great king ... met his death.”

—Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

My aim here is to examine three of *FM*’s characters whose lives are brutally separated from those around them, transforming each into a “character with a unique destiny.”<sup>22</sup> These characters resist the seeming irrevocability<sup>23</sup> that marks their lives, whether it is Wudinesh’s struggle against the recurring death of her loved ones or Bezabih and Seble’s struggle against what is referred to in the novel as “የሞት ህይወት” (a living death), that is, a life of forced celibacy.<sup>24</sup> This tension on the level of character is registered in the novel’s formal/narratological dialectic between the temporality of the characters’ scenic/lived present (and, by extension, the temporality of ordinary existence) and the temporality of their fate. This dialectic, I argue, contributes to the emergence and breakdown of *FM*’s realism; the temporality of fate, and the allegories and irrevocability associated with it, threatens to dissolve the novel’s realism as this realism takes form through the narrative’s recurring convergence on the characters’ lived and scenic present and through the recognition of contingency and human agency that this convergence allows.

<sup>21</sup> Yonas Admasu, “On the State of Amharic Literary Scholarship,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 34.1 (2001): 27–28.

<sup>22</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> I use this term not simply as a synonym for fatalism but in the way Jameson does. Drawing on Sartre and Walter Benjamin, Jameson argues that “the mark of the irrevocable” (as well as death) is a constitutive aspect of the *récit* and the traditional tale; “the temporal past is now redefined in terms of what cannot be changed, what lies beyond the reach of repetition or rectification ... The irrevocable then comes to stand as a mark of one specific temporality which is separated off from another kind ... a marked time brutally differentiating itself from ordinary existence,” adding “the category of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’ ... [is] the deeper philosophical content of this narrative form, which might also be evoked as the narrative preterite, the mark of irrevocable time, of the event that has happened once and for all.” Note the importance of the concept of “the mark” here, associated with the *récit* that transforms “an individual into a character with a unique destiny ... something given to you uniquely to bear and to suffer.” Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 19–21.

<sup>24</sup> Haddis Alemayehu, *Fikir iske Mekabir* (Addis Ababa: Mega Publishing and Distribution PLC, 2017–2018), 64, 92.

I then link this narratological structure to the novel’s theme about the reproduction of daily life under the traditional social order by arguing that the dialectical tension described previously informs the novel’s critique of the reproduction of individual and familial life under the feudal order as being dominated by forces associated with death and communal domination. Lastly, I use Irele to argue that, though this unfreedom is seen by the characters themselves in supernatural and fatalistic terms, the authorial perspective is, nevertheless, a critically distant one that regards this unfreedom as earthbound and historical.

Bezabih’s mother Wudinessh is the first character encountered who seems to be in the inescapable grip of fate. Although she comes from wealth, she suffers from the improbable circumstance of being widowed three times.<sup>25</sup> In the scene where she sits reflecting about her decision to marry Bogale, the dialectical tensions mentioned previously are manifest:

እመት ውድነሽ ... ባላቸውን ብላታ ብዙነህን ሲያገቡ የገዙዋትን ክብ መስታወት አውጥተው በግ አድርገው ሲከፍቱ አንዲት እንደመስታወቱ ክብብ ያለች ፊት ከመስታወቱ ውስጥ ብቅ አለች። ትኩር ብለው ሲያዩዋት እስዋም ትኩር ብላ አየቻቸው። አንገታቸውን ወደ ግራ ዘንበል አድርገው ወደመስታወቱ ቀረብ ሲሉ እስዋም አንገትዋን ዘንበል አድርጋ ወደሳቸው ቀረብ አለች። እመት ውድነሽ ያችን የምታምር ክብ ፊት እየተመለከቱ።

“አንዲት ፍሬ ልጅ!” አሉ። “አንዲት ፍሬ ልጅ! ሞት የምታስንቂ የምታምሪ አንዲት ፍሬ ልጅ!” አሉ እመስታወቱ ውስጥ ያለችውን ፊት እንደሚስሙ ሁሉ ከንፈራቸውን ወደፊት ሙጥሙጥ አድርገው። እስዋም እንዲሁ አደረገች። ከዚያ እዩሳቂ ወደሁዋላ ራቅ ሲሉ እስዋም እዩሳቂቸ ወደሁዋላ ራቅ አለች።

“ወይው ጉድ! አሁን የማደርገውን ሁሉ ሰው የሚያይ ቢሆን ምን ይለኝ ነበር? አብዳለች ትታሰር እባል ነበር! የብቻ መኖር አንድ ጥቅሙ የሰሩትን ሰርቶ ያልሰሩ መስሎ ለምታዬት ማስቻሉ ነው! ለካ ሰውን እብድ የሚያሰኘው እብድ የሚያደርገውን ማድረግ አይደለም፤ እብድ የሚያደርገውን ሲያደርጉ መታየቱ ነው!” አሉ እመት ውድነሽ ፊታቸው ትንሽ እንደማዘን ብሎ። እመስታወቱ ውስጥ ያለችው ክብ ፊትም እሳቸው ሲያዝኑ አይታ እንደማዘን አለች። ግንባራቸውን ቁጥር አይናቸውን ትኩር አድርገው በተመለከቱዋት መጠን አዝና፤ ግንባርዋ ከቅንድባቸዋ መሀከል ታጥፎ፤ ከዚያ በላይ ከፍ ብሎ ስድብ በጉልህ ተጽፎ አይ፤ አነበቡት “አንቺ ባሎችሽን የፈጀሽ የባል በሽታ” ይላል ስድቡ። “የማንኩሳው አባቴ፤ የማንኩሳው አባቴ ምነው ምን አልሁህና ስድብ ለማረው ሁሉ መሰደቢያ አደረግኸኝ እባክህ በቃሽ በለኝ!” አሉና እመት ውድነሽ መስታወቱን ጥለው፤ አይናቸውን በሁለት እጃቸው ሽፍነው ያለቅሱ ጀመር።<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 11–12. Wudinessh is later widowed a fourth time, an implausibility Fikre misses in his interpretation of the novel’s plot as too contrived. As shown in the following, however, this implausibility, and others still, is not an aberration but an integral feature of the narrative.

<sup>26</sup> *Emmet* Wudinessh ... brought out and opened the mirror that she had bought when married to *Blatta Bizuneh* and saw a face emerge in it as round as the mirror. When she narrowed her gaze on herself, the face also narrowed her gaze. When she leaned closer with her neck tipped leftward, the face also leaned closer with her neck tipped leftward.

This scene captures a profound tension in Wudiness's conflicted self-conception. On the one hand, she is on her own and engrossed in a rather positive image of herself, enjoying a short-lived obliviousness to the demands of social conformity and even the threat of death. This is accompanied by a scenic quality of writing that largely halts the passage of time. On the other hand, she quickly becomes self-conscious and constrained by the imagined presence of others, seeing herself as cursed, symbolized by the words of insult on her reflection. Indeed, this mark of "fate"<sup>27</sup> disrupts her suspended isolation, transforming her reflection into an allegory<sup>28</sup> of destiny. Thus, this scene is reinserted into narrative time, and a crushing sense of irrevocability drowns out Wudiness's momentary sense of autonomy.

Another notable scene that comes to allegorize a character's unique destiny is the one that describes Seble's father's compound:

ፊታውራሪ መሸሻ ግቢ በሚሉት ሰፊ ሜዳ ለድርቆሽ የሚያስጠብቁት ከሰርዶ ካክሮማ ከጉድይና ከዋራት አንድ ላይ ተደባልቆ ያደገው ሳር ቀደም ብሎ የበቀለው አፍርቶ ዘግዮት ብሎ የበቀለው ቢጫ ሰማያዊ ነጭና ቀይ አበባ አብባ ሰብለውንጌል ከተቀመጣችበት ዘቅዝቆ ሲመለከቱት ያን ሰፊ ግቢ ለማስጌጥ ከዳር እስከዳር የተዘረጋ አምሮ የተሰራ ዝጉርጉር ምንጣፍ ይመስል ነበር። ጸሀይ እየሞቀ በሄደ መጠን በዚያ ሰፊ ግቢ የተነጠፈው ሳርና በቤቶች አካባቢ የተተከሉ የፍሬ አትክልት አንድ ላይ ባዩር ይነዙት የነበረ ገንታዊ መአዛ ሽቱ በብዙው እንደተረፈረፈበት መዋኛ ከውስጡ መውጣት አያስመኝም ነበር። በወፍራምና በቀጭን አስማምተው እጩዞራ ካበባ ወዳበባ ይዘዋወሩ የነበሩ ንቦችና አንድ ጊዜ በፍሬ ተክሎች ዙሪያ ሌላ ጊዜ በሜዳው በተነጠፈው ያበባ ምንጣፍ ላይ በየጉዋዳቸው እጩዞራ ይጨፍሩ የነበሩ በጸደይ ብቻ የሚመጡ፤ ጌጠኛ ብራብሮዎች ሲታዩ ያ ከልምላሜና ከመአዛ ከውበትና ከሌላ ድርና ማግ የተሰራ ጸደይ ያ የክረምትን ቁርና የበጋን ሀሩር የማይሰማ

*Emmet* Wudiness, watching the pretty round face, said: "How young you are! Young and beautiful, able to defy death itself!" She puckered up her lips as though she were about to kiss the face in the mirror. The face did the same. *Emmet* Wudiness then leaned back and laughed; the face also leaned back and laughed.

"My goodness! What would people say if they saw what I was doing now? They would say that I had gone mad and that I should be put away! One of the comforts of living alone is being able to do whatever one wants and then appear to not have done those things! Strange to think that it is not the actions of a person alone that make them out to be crazy; it is being seen doing those actions!"

So said *Emmet* Wudiness, her face beginning to take on a slight look of sadness. And the little round face in the mirror, seeing that look, also started to take it on. With a furrowed brow and a sharpened gaze, she continued looking at the face and saw an insult written plainly on her forehead. She read that insult as "You mariticial plague on husbands."

"Oh my Father of Mankusa," she replied, "what have I done to deserve being the object of everyone's insult? I beg you to end this torment!" Dropping the mirror, she buried her face in her hands and started to cry. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 17–18 (my trans. [all the translations of the quotes from *FM* are my own]).

<sup>27</sup> I interpret this insult as a mark of "fate" given Wudiness gets widowed a fourth time, when Bogale dies.

<sup>28</sup> I interpret the reflection as an allegory because Wudiness ultimately sees it as signifying her fate, a symbolic significance that comes to dominate the reflection's previous more concrete and detailed portrayal.

ጸደይ ባጭር ጊዜ የሚያልፍ መሆኑን በመረዳት ሳያልፍ እናገጥበት ሳያልፍ እንደሰትበት ሳያልፍ እንስራበት ብለው የሚጣደፉ ይመስሉ ነበር።<sup>29</sup>

Seble subsequently realizes that this scene, teeming with life and seemingly still in time, will disappear with the change of seasons, and recognizes it as announcing her own passing youth and fecundity.<sup>30</sup> Like Wudinesh, Seble is presented as separate from others,<sup>31</sup> only in her case it is because of “የክብር ባርነት,”<sup>32</sup> her forced celibacy to maintain the honor and “purity” of her family’s royal bloodline.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the scene is reinserted into narrative time as an allegory of Seble’s doomed fate of bondage at the hands of her father and his house.

Such scenes break from the realism advocated by the likes of Fikre. Moreover, for critics that give primacy to descriptions free of allegorical meaning, these scenes may not seem significant. Taye, for instance, argues that “the main centers of interest” such as Meshesha’s compound are not described in detail compared to “Alaqa Kenfu’s Qene school, for instance.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the latter scene seems devoid of relevance to symbolism or plot, coming closest to Jameson’s category of the “eternal present.” Nonetheless, what strikes me as significant about these scenes is precisely what makes them invisible to such critics, namely the one-sided tension between destiny and the scenic present, and by extension between the characters’ sense of fatalism and freedom. Despite the momentary stalling of narrative time and the characters’ momentary sense of possibility, the story implacably resumes toward its fated conclusion and a sense of irrevocability overwhelms the characters involved.

Nevertheless, these scenes draw attention to the characters’ lived present and, by extension, to the temporality of their ordinary existence, presenting a more positive picture of the traditional village that captures “the distinctive

<sup>29</sup> When seen from where Seblewongel was sitting, the sprawling field they call *Fitawrari* Meshesha’s compound—filled with a mix of *serdo*, *akirma*, *gudiy*, and *warat* grass, which was set aside for hay, the older grass seeding and the younger blooming with yellow, blue, white, and red flowers—looked as though it were laid from end to end with a beautifully dappled carpet. As the sun gathered warmth, the heavenly smell released by the grass that covered that large compound and by the fruit bearing trees that were planted near the huts was like a pool sprayed with perfume, filling one with the desire to stay immersed in it. The bees, buzzing in varied tunes from one flower to another, and the butterflies, frolicking from fruit tree to blooming field, seemed as though they were of a mind to quickly take advantage of this short-lived but alluring *tsedey* (the season of harvest in the months of September, October, and November) season that refuses to heed the chill of *kiremt* (the rainy season that precedes *tsedey*) or the scorch of *bega* (the dry season that comes after *tsedey*). Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 92–93.

<sup>31</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 244–45.

<sup>32</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 98.

<sup>33</sup> Meshesha echoes Bezabih’s likening of his forced celibacy to a living death. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 64. Only for him a living death consists of his class status being compromised by Seble and Bezabih’s love affair due to the latter’s lowly background. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 409. This has to do with the reproduction of traditional class relations, which is described in more detail later.

<sup>34</sup> Taye, “Form in the Amharic Novel,” 170.



poetry of its form of life,"<sup>35</sup> to use Irele's words. I am thinking, for example, of the scene that relates the account of Wudinesh preparing dinner after Bogale returns from work, their skirmish and immediate reconciliation,<sup>36</sup> or the scene where Bezabih arrives at the house of *qene* (ቅኔ ቤት) as a student and sees *Aleqa* Kinfu's masterful performance of that poetic form.<sup>37</sup> Another is the memorable scene where Gebre plays his flute after putting the cattle to pasture and encounters and engages in love games with Habtish, a slave in Meshesha's house who, momentarily free from her duties, is drawn by Gebre's music.<sup>38</sup> Yet another is where, in the absence of Meshesha and Tiruaynet, Bezabih, Seble, and Habtish interact freely and playfully during one of Seble's lessons with Bezabih.<sup>39</sup>

However, these scenes also draw attention to nearly ineluctable circumstances that impede the reproduction of the characters' personal and familial lives. In Wudinesh's case, it is the death of her husbands and Bezabih's recurrent life-threatening childhood illnesses, a result of the poor social and technical development of premodern society, which evoke in her a sense of spiritual irrevocability. As a result, she commits Bezabih to a vow of lifelong celibacy and ecclesiastical service to elicit divine assurance of his survival. Bogale contests this decision with the more worldly desire of teaching Bezabih the skills of agricultural production so he may take his place,<sup>40</sup> stylistically enhanced through rhyming (ቀምበር/ምፈር/ዘር/ነበር) that seems to echo this generationally repeated social reproductive practice or perhaps invoke the institution of *rist*, which mandates the hereditary transfer of the right to agricultural land.<sup>41</sup> It is Wudinesh's position, however, that prevails.

This allusion to the practice of committing children to ecclesiastical service and celibacy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the contradictions it foregrounds between heaven and earth, celibacy and procreation, and commitment and freedom, provide the author with fertile grounds to develop his critique of the traditional social order through narrative irony. For Bezabih's prohibition from engaging in carnal love, marriage, and having children, far from securing life, ironically guarantees untimely death.

Bezabih leaves his parents in their old age to free himself from this prohibition, abandoning his responsibility of retiring them.<sup>42</sup> This social reproductive role of children retiring their parents is ironically subverted by Wudinesh's

<sup>35</sup> Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," 15.

<sup>36</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 21–29.

<sup>37</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 72–75.

<sup>38</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 95–97.

<sup>39</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 247–49.

<sup>40</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2006), 98–99. The novel makes an explicit reference to this institution. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 229.

<sup>42</sup> Notice here the extent of what Marx characterizes as relations of dependence and communal domination, which he contrasts with "free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth" in capitalist societies. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations for the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1993), 158. This, however, is a seeming independence, Marx continues, that does not constitute "an abolition of 'relations of dependence.'" Marx, *Grundrisse*, 163–65. There is communal

actions to secure it, leading the community to oxymoronically label her and Bogale as “የወላድ መካን,” childless parents. Wudinesh sees this as another sign of God’s prophetic curse on her: “እንዲያው በድሌ እንዲያው በጎዶሎ ሌሊት በፈጠረኝ በእግዚአብሔር ነው የማለቅስ.”<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Bogale emphasizes Wudinesh’s own role in driving away their son.<sup>44</sup> It is this that constitutes the tragedy of Wudinesh and Bogale’s story; through their attempts to avoid their “fate,” they ultimately fulfill it, albeit in a conflicted and ironically mundane way. This reversal, besides incisively critiquing the religious practice of vowing children to celibacy, underscores that people, although shaped by circumstance, play a major role in shaping their circumstances and that their lives are not divinely preordained. This ironic subversion of the doctrine of fatalism is informed by the dialectic in the narrative that maintains the semblance of destiny while simultaneously dispelling it.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the preceding intimate portrayal of the characters, however, Wudinesh and Bogale’s story concludes as follows:

አቶ በጋለ የተቀበሩ እለት እመት ውድነሽ ታመው አደሩ። ባላቸው በታመሙ ጊዜ እሳቸው አንስተው አስተኝተው ደካማ አይነ ስውር ሊያደርገው የሚችለውን ሁሉ አድርገው በራስጌ በግርጌ ሆነው አስታመው አልቅሰው ባይቀብሩ አስቀብሩዋቸው። እሳቸው ሲታመሙ ግን ሌላው ሁሉ ይቅርና በር እንኩዋ የሚከፍትና የሚዘጋላቸው ባጠገባቸው ማንም ሳይኖር በባዶ ቤት ሶስት ቀን ታመው ሞቱ። በሽታቸው ምን እንደነብርና እንዴት እንደሞቱ የሚያውቅ ሰው አልነበረም። እስከ-ብዙ ጊዜ ድረስ በማንኩሳ ሲመረቅ “እንደበጋለ መብራቱና እንደውድነሽ በጣሙ የወላድ መካኖች ከመሆን ያድናችሁ።” ይባል ነበር።<sup>46</sup>

pressure on Wudinesh to remarry. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 11–12. In addition, *rist* and retirement, which depend on kinship and family, can serve as examples. Marx indicates that such relations are predominant in precapitalist societies: “The less social power the medium of exchange possesses ... the greater must be the power of the community which binds the individuals together ... ancient conditions (feudal, also) thus disintegrate with the development of commerce, of luxury, of money, of exchange value, while modern society arises and grows in the same measure.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, 157–58. And as discussed later, this extends into the realm of class relations of the feudal order. See also Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 334.

<sup>43</sup> “It is God, who created me in an empty night for a life of misfortune, that makes me cry.” Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 48–49.

<sup>45</sup> This narrative irony, which seems at once “classical” and modern, may have been inspired by Kebede Mikael, whose work draws on ancient Greek drama. Sara Marzagora, “Ethiopian Intellectual History and the Global: Käbbädä Mikael’s Geographies of Belonging,” *Journal of World Literature* 4.1 (2019): 118–19. Kebede was a major literary influence on Haddis. Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 150–51.

<sup>46</sup> *Emmet* Wudinesh fell ill on the same day *Ato* Bogale was buried. She did all that an old blind woman could do when nursing her sick husband, always being by his sickbed and even seeing to his burial. But when she fell ill, there was no one around to even open and close doors for her let alone all else. She died three days later, alone in her home. There was no one who knew how and from what. For a long time thereafter, it became a common invocation in Mankusa to say, “May God spare you from becoming childless parents like Bogale Mebratu and Wudinesh Betamu.” Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 58.

Note the absence of the scenic and descriptive qualities shown previously, leaving us with a vague bare-bones tale, whose finality reveals the “teleological determination” of the récit.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Wudinesh and Bogale’s story is ultimately preserved in village tradition as an invocation of divine protection. As such, the ordinary and contingent existence of this couple is forever denied, and we are left with a tale of their unique and irrevocable fate.

Bezabih’s story bears a similar mark of fate, shot through with irony. He recognizes his being “የስእለት ልጅ,” a vowed child, as a curse that sets him apart from his peers and curtails his freedom.<sup>48</sup> However, even his flight from home does not evoke a feeling of absolute liberty since the violated vow remains irresolvable in his mind.<sup>49</sup> Bezabih’s freedom is, thus, hemmed in by his sense of being at the mercy of divine powers, indicative of the trope of divinely ordained destiny. More, fate functions as a formal element in Bezabih and Seble’s story as evidenced by its tragic resolution, which will be further discussed in the following.

Indeed, one finds a similar temporal dialectic here to the one explored previously, manifest in the following scene where Bezabih and Seble discover their common experience<sup>50</sup> and mutual attraction:

በዛብህ አፋን ከፍቶ በፍቅር የሚዋኙ አይኖቹን በስዋ ላይ ተክሎ ሲመለከታት ሲመረምራት ያች ድሮ የሚያውቃት ውብዋ ደማምዋ ሰብላ ከድሮዋ ሚሊዮን ጊዜ የተዋበች ያበበች ከመምሰልዋም በላይ ባያት በመረመራት መጠን ሰአሊ ስእሉን በመጨረሻ ማስገጫ ቀለሙ ሲነካካው እያማረ እንደሚሄድ በዬደቂቃው በዬንኡስ ደቂቃው እይተዋበች የምትሄድ መሰላ ታዬችውና የሱም መገረም በዚያው መጠን እይበዛ ሄደ ተጠራጠረ። እልም ናት እውን? ሰው ናት መንፈስ? መንካት አለበት! እንደ ቶማስ እጁን ሰይ ዳብሶ ነክቶ ካልተረዳ አይኑን ብቻ ማመን አቃተው! ስለዚህ አፋን እንደ ከፈተ እጁን ቀስ --- አድርጎ ሰይ አንገትዋን አገጭዋን የተከፈቱ ከንፈሮቻዋን አፍንጫዋን አይኖቻዋን ጉንጭቸዋን ጆሮዋቸዋን ከዚያ አይኖቹ የሚያዩትን ሁሉ የሰውነት ክፍልዋን ይዳብስ ጀመር። አይኑ ያዬው እውነት መሆኑን እጁም መሰከረ! አይኑ አልተሳሳተም እልም አይደለችም እውን ናት! መንፈስ አይደለችም ሰው ናት ... እንደሌላው ሰው ከስጋና ከደም ካጥንትና ከጅማት የተሰራች ሴት ናት! ሰብላ ናት! ...

ስለዚህ መናገር የለ መሳቅ የለ ፈገግታ እንኩዋ የለ እንዲያው ዝም ብለው ብቻ አፋቸውን ከፍተው በመገረም ፊት እይተያዩ እይተደባበሱ ተቀመጡ።<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 245.

<sup>48</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 46.

<sup>49</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 64–65.

<sup>50</sup> This commonality lies in both their lives being dominated by their parents for reproducing their familial life (in Wudinesh and Bogale’s case) and class status (in Meshesha and Tiruaynet’s case). Their lives are thus sacrificed for what their parents see as their indebtedness to God and ancestry, respectively.

<sup>51</sup> When Bezzabih, mouth agape, scrutinized her with firmly planted love-stricken eyes, she not only seemed a million times more beautiful than the Seble he knew from before, but as he continued gazing at her she seemed to grow more beautiful by the minute and by the second, like a painting receiving the final adorning strokes of the painter’s brush; his suspicions grew as well. Is she a dream

This suspended scene draws attention to the characters' physical and grounded presence through the juxtaposition of dream and reality, of the spiritual and material. The narrative is frozen as Bezabih and Seble are engrossed in each other and in feelings whose import is relayed more by sense perception than narration or even speech. In a novel that relies on what Sahle Selassie describes as "the dramatic method ... [where the] author prepares the stage and then makes the characters engage in dialogue," such scenes of slow and silent interaction are markedly different from the dominant style of the novel.<sup>52</sup>

This scene, like the ones described previously, is eventually reinserted into narrative time: "የወይዘሮ ጥሩ አይነት መምጫ ደረሰ። ያን ተራ ፍቅራቸውን ዝምታቸውን ፈጽመው ሱሰቸውን አሳልፈው የደናግሉን የንጹሀኑን ብሩክ ቅዱስ ፍቅር ለማቆየት የሚመጡበት ጊዜ ደረሰ!"<sup>53</sup> This ironic juxtaposition suggests that Seble and Bezabih's blameless love will (hypocritically) be construed as an offense. It also hints at their fated end of celibacy, implicitly reintroducing the temporality of destiny.

Seble and Bezabih's forbidden love, which creates for them an island of freedom in a world of slavery,<sup>54</sup> eventually raises suspicion and Meshesha interrupts their plans of escape, imprisons her, and has his servants pursue him, leading to Bezabih's binding sense of fate: "ለካ ክፉም ሆነ በጎ የሚሰሩ ሰዎች መሰረዎች ናቸው እንጂ ሰራተኛው እግዚአብሔር ስለሆነ ... ክፉ የተሰራበት ወይም በጎ የተሰራለት ዘሮ ዘሮ ክፉውን ወይም በጎውን በሌላ አማካይነት አያጣውም ማለት ነው!"<sup>55</sup> Bezabih adds "እናቴ ምሽት ሳላገባ በድንግልና ታቦት እንዳገለግል በስጅላት ስለሰጠችኝ በስዋ አዝኜ ከታሰርሁበት አምልጭ ምሽት አግብቼ ለመኖር ነበር አገሬን የለቀቅሁ። ደዩት አሁን በሌላ መንገድ ወደዚያው ጥንት ወደተመደበልኝ ህይወቴ መመለሴ ነው!"<sup>56</sup> This disavowal of the potency of day-to-day human choices indicates that the temporality of fate dominates the immediate temporality of ordinary existence. Indeed, from Bezabih's perspective, filled with fatalistic guilt about offenses

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or is she real? Is she person or spirit? He must touch her! Like Thomas, he needed to confirm by touch what he could not trust his eyes to fully comprehend! With his mouth still open, he reached ever so slowly with his hand and began to caress her neck, her chin, her open lips, her eyes, her cheeks, her ears and then every part of her body visible to him. His hands bore witness to the reality of what his eyes had seen! His eyes were not mistaken, she is not a dream but real! She is not a spirit but a person ... a woman made from flesh, blood, bone, and sinew like everyone else. She is Seble! ... And so, they sat there without speaking, laughing, or even smiling, only gazing and caressing each other with silent mouth's open in expressions of wonder. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 319–20.

<sup>52</sup> Sahle Selassie Berhane Mariam, review of *Fikir iske Mekabir*, by Haddis Alemayehu, *Weyeyet* 2.1 (1968–1969), quoted in Taye, "Form in the Amharic Novel," 173.

<sup>53</sup> The time of *Weyzero Tiruaynet's* arrival came! The time came for her to interrupt the love of the blessed and virginally pure after having satiated her lust for her own base and adulterous love. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 320.

<sup>54</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 324.

<sup>55</sup> "I see now that those who do good or evil are only tools in God's hand ... the person to whom either good or evil is allotted will, in the end, have it done to him through other means." Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 430.

<sup>56</sup> "I left my home saddened by my mother's decision to vow me into becoming a virgin servant of the saints, to escape from that bondage and be able to live as a married man. Look how I have now returned by another path to that same life allotted to me long ago!" Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 430.

against God and family,<sup>57</sup> the narrative appears little more than a moral tale about the insignificance of human agency in the face of divine providence. Although Gudu Kassa, in a manner reminiscent of Bogale's earlier role, insists on an earthly explanation of events, Bezabih ultimately resigns to his "fate,"<sup>58</sup> throwing Bezabih's fatalism into sharp relief against Gudu Kassa's worldly perspective. What is more, Seble ultimately adopts a similar apprehension of her own life,<sup>59</sup> more on which later.

It is worth noting here the way Meshesha's house is memorialized in the wake of Meshesha and Tiruaynet's death, which happens on the appointed day of Seble and Tafere's wedding and immediately after Seble's escape. The wedding, in another ironic reversal, turns into a funeral, where a narrative poem is recited.<sup>60</sup> Like the conclusion to Wudinesh and Bogale's story, this narrative is one of singularity and mortality, told to invoke divine protection from a turn of events that can only be explained by the couple's seemingly irrevocable fate, which is traced back to their having a female instead of a male child. Furthermore, the same minimalist style and withdrawn perspective are present here. This final tale<sup>61</sup> illustrates the concentrated force of the *récit*, reducing each event to a function that leads to the tragic conclusion of the story.

I contend, therefore, that the temporality of destiny and the philosophy of fatalism are vital for a fuller understanding of *FM*. In positing fate in a way that threatens to dissolve the novel's realism, the author enhances the portrayal of the daily lives of individuals as being dominated by forces associated with death and communal domination/dependence.<sup>62</sup> These forces are wholly earthbound and historical, notwithstanding the characters' recognition of them as divinely ordained, as evidenced by the form and flow of the narrative itself, the tensions immanent in its plot and narrative technique. This appearance of destiny is dispelled by the recognition of contingency and human agency allowed by the narrative's constant convergence on the characters' lived present and by the split between the narrator and the fatalistic subjectivity of the characters, a distance in point of view<sup>63</sup> maintained by including Bogale and Gudu Kassa's contrarian views.

<sup>57</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 462.

<sup>58</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 431, 474–76.

<sup>59</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 549–51.

<sup>60</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 490–91.

<sup>61</sup> Moreover, it is this type of tale that is referred to by the word “ግላጊቶ.” Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 525. The noun form of this word is ጎረቱ, which translates to *tale/fable*. This word appears earlier with the word “ግላጊቶ,” the noun form being ጎረቱ, *song*, where it is explicitly linked with social conformity to avoid being the subject of such tales. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 323–24.

<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting that Seble, in her flight from home, is accepted as “የእግዚአብሔር እንግዳ” (a guest of God, literally translated) by a family in an unfamiliar village, a custom according to which travelers without a place of lodging are to be hosted by homes in their path (without charge) and without which Seble would have perished. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 516. Relations of dependence in the daily life of peasant society, at least here, seem to be portrayed in a favorable light, and indeed seem “loftier” than the alienating relations in a world where market exchange prevails. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 488.

<sup>63</sup> Another indication of this distance is the narrator's mentioning of items such as the violin and the photograph when analogizing sound and image, items peculiar to the narrative voice. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 23, 449.

This distance resembles the one Irele identifies in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for the narrative form of Achebe's novel is not only linked to the state of unfreedom of individuals,<sup>64</sup> but also signals an authorial perspective that seems culturally distant from "the background of life—of thoughts and manners" of the text's referential world.<sup>65</sup>

However, one key difference between these two authors seems to be that whereas Achebe's "identification with the indigenous heritage ... [was] a later and conscious development" due to having been disconnected from it by the effects of colonial conquest and his Christian schooling, at least as Irele tells us,<sup>66</sup> Haddis grew up in and was intimately familiar with tradition, a result of Ethiopia's peculiarity in sub-Saharan African history of having maintained its political independence amid the onslaught of Western imperialism in the late nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup> The traditional order thereby survived, albeit with numerous reforms, until the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 despite the disruption of fascist Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941.

In addition to his familiarity with the traditional world, Haddis had immense exposure to the new and encroaching world of modernity. His background in traditional and modern education as well as his participation in the anticolonial war against fascist Italy and his positions as a diplomat abroad are important here.<sup>68</sup> More, his numerous and unsettled roles<sup>69</sup> in the budding state bureaucracy of the postwar period, and his being a member of the educated middle class that came to assume administrative positions alongside the traditional nobility<sup>70</sup> indicate his knowledgeability of and disaffection with the ruling establishment and ideas of the day. I elaborate this point about Haddis as a (critically as opposed to culturally) distant insider and its relevance to *FM* in the next subsection.

## The Tragedy of History

"It was human history, masquerading as God's Purpose."

—Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

<sup>64</sup> Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," 15.

<sup>65</sup> Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," 3.

<sup>66</sup> Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," 3.

<sup>67</sup> Adding to this historical peculiarity, the Ethiopian state was undertaking its own imperial conquests during this period. Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 38–42.

<sup>68</sup> Alemu Alene Kebede, "A Short Political Biography of Kibur Ato Haddis Alemayehu," *African Journal of History and Culture* 7.1 (2015): 29–31. See also Haddis Alemayehu, *Tizita* (Addis Ababa: Kuraz Publishing Agency 1992–1993).

<sup>69</sup> Haddis was, for instance, sent to London as an ambassador to Great Britain and the Netherlands from 1961 to 1966. Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 143. Bahru Zewde views this position as probably being "an exile post," a sign of "estrangement between ... [Haddis] and the emperor." Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960–1974* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2014), 65, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Alemu, "A Short Political Biography of Kibur Ato Haddis Alemayehu," 31–35. Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 139–44. See Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 244–55 for a historical account of the class composition of the Ethiopian state administrative structure of this period.

So far, we have discussed social reproduction as it relates to the characters' personal and familial lives. But this aspect of social reproduction is interwoven in *FM* with the reproduction of the feudal mode of production as a socio-historical system. And here, too, temporality plays a crucial role.

In what follows, I discuss the relation between the realist narrative mode and the older narrative modes of the traditional epic and *gedl* in *FM*, expanding our study's scale from textuality to that of intertextuality. I then link this discussion to the novel's theme about the philosophy of history that underpins the reproduction of the social relations and institutions of the traditional system. I argue that *FM* adopts the narrative modes of the epic and the *gedl* only to ultimately distance itself from these traditional narrative modes in favor of the realist narrative modes of novels and modern histories. This alternation and ironic juxtaposition of narrative modes informs the novel's critique of the reproduction of the feudal socio-historical system as being based on the philosophical doctrine that humans do not make their own history and are subject to the cosmic order under which they live. *FM*'s ultimate disassociation from traditional narrative modes should be read, in my view, as underscoring the historicity of the traditional order and as endorsing the modern philosophy of history that frees humans from this position of subjects by recognizing them as the makers of their own history.

Seble's inability to marry is not only linked to the preservation of her family's aristocratic status but also to their claim of "unadulterated" royal lineage. Her future is thus foreclosed upon to preserve the inherited glory of kings and queens long gone, as related in the following scene where the family discusses the failed plans to wed Seble with Asege: "በፊታውራሪ መሸሻ ቁዋንቁዋ [ፊታውራሪ አሰጊ] አባት ብቻ ሳይሆን አያትና ቅድመ አያት ከዚያም በላይ ጭምር የነበሩዋቸው በቆዳና በቅቤ የተገዛ ሳይሆን ካጥንትና ከደም የተወረሰ ጌትነት የነበራቸው አጥንታቸውም ሆነ ደማቸው ሚዛን የሚደፉ ነበሩ።"<sup>71</sup> Notice the juxtaposition of two sources of power here. The first has to do with commodity production/exchange and money. The second has to do with belonging to a descent group and therefore kinship, with emphasis made on the warrior status of the group, which includes the dead.<sup>72</sup> Meshesha resents the potential commodification of aristocratic honor and property, something that he associates with the decline of his power and status,<sup>73</sup> and is fond of Asege because of his lineage. However, Asege's last-minute announcement of his unwillingness to marry Seble in the custom of marrying a maiden greatly offends Meshesha and their arrangement falls apart. When consulted to ask for restitution from Asege, Meshesha angrily rejects this by stating how that would amount to selling off his family's and royal forefathers' honor ("የኔንና ያባቶቼን የነገስታቱን ክብር") for money.<sup>74</sup> reaffirming his disdain for commodity exchange and money

<sup>71</sup> In the language of *Fitawrari Meshesha*, [*Fitawrari Asege*] not only had a father, but a grandfather, a great grandfather, and more, having honor that was inherited through blood and not bought with hides and *qibe* (a type of seasoned and clarified butter used in Ethiopian and Eritrean food). Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 99.

<sup>72</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 210.

<sup>73</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 100–01.

<sup>74</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 102.

power and further invoking inherited honor and the dead.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Meshesha explicitly claims descent from the Solomonic bloodline.<sup>76</sup>

This portrayal of the aristocracy is in line with sociological and historical studies of the traditional order. The property right that belongs to the landed aristocracy is *gult*,<sup>77</sup> usually translated as fief. *Gult* is the right to receive tribute from the peasantry living and working on a particular piece of agricultural land. *Gult*-holders were therefore tribute receivers whose rights to such property were often intended to be permanent<sup>78</sup> and sometimes hereditary.<sup>79</sup> This institution was often justified as state compensation for military services rendered.<sup>80</sup> In addition, the nobility was not only a class distinct from the peasants (*gebbar/balager*) over which it ruled but was also constituted with steep hierarchies of its own. Those considered of royal descent (the *mesafint*) were distinguished from other nobles (the *mekuanint*), and their affiliations with the Solomonic dynasty afforded them supreme status.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the nobility, whose “traditional functions were that of governor and warrior,” regarded any form of labor and profit-making as degrading.<sup>82</sup>

However, the portrayal of the aristocracy in *FM* is also imbued with literary qualities that require closer scrutiny. Meshesha’s sense of greatness and his tragic sense of decline are traits that can potentially be part and parcel of a heroic depiction. The reference to “ደገገስታቱ ... ክብር” (the glory/honor of the kings) heightens this potentiality as it can be interpreted as an allusion to the *Kebra Nagast*, *The Glory of Kings*, a fourteenth-century epic that chronicles the rise of the Solomonic dynasty and its transplantation, together with the Ark of the Covenant and, by extension, the true Zion, to Ethiopia. The heroic stature of King Solomon and Menelik I, his son and founder of the Solomonic dynasty, is primarily relayed in this narrative through the immense significance that their bloodline holds both in heaven and on earth:

And King Solomon answered and said unto them, “Where is it then that he [Menelik I] wisheth to go?” And they answered ... “We have not enquired of him, for he is awesome like thyself ... [they] have come from the dominions of Hendakê (Candace) and Ethiopia ...” ... His eldest son was the King of Ethiopia, the son of the Queen of Ethiopia, and was the firstborn of whom [God] spake prophetically, “God sware unto David in righteousness, and repented not, ‘Of the fruit of thy body will I make to sit upon thy throne.’” And God gave unto David His servant grace before Him, and granted unto him that there should sit upon the throne of Godhead One of his seed in the flesh, from the Virgin, and should judge the living and the dead, and reward

<sup>75</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 99, 101.

<sup>76</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 104.

<sup>77</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 213, 267.

<sup>78</sup> Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270–1527* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 98.

<sup>81</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 110.

<sup>82</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 111.



every man according to his work, One to whom praise is meet, our Lord Jesus Christ, for ever and ever, Amen. And He gave him one on the earth who should become king over the Tabernacle of the Law of the holy, heavenly Zion, that is to say, the King of Ethiopia. And as for those who reigned, who were not [of] Israel, that was due to the transgression of the law and the commandment, whereat God was not pleased.<sup>83</sup>

The preeminence of Solomon and especially Menelik I here is surpassed only by the cosmic scope of the order of which they are ordained to be the earthly rulers. Further, this genealogical account is accompanied with a prophetic conception of time where, in Auerbach's famous words, "the here and now is no longer a link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future."<sup>84</sup> This idea of divinely ordained irrevocability, expressed in the aforementioned quote's emphasis on the eternal nature of the rule (Solomonic rule on earth and of the divine rule of Christ) of those who have been uniquely chosen by God (the descendants of David), is precisely what we have identified previously in connection to the temporality of destiny. Moreover, this prophetic conception of time is meant to provide divine sanction to the rule of the monarchs in the story and those that follow in their lineage. Indeed, the prevalence of this prophetic sense of time is such that it structures the narrative itself; though Menelik I is not yet coronated, the previous passage reads as though he, along with his descendants, is.

Meshesha's invocation of the ancestral dead and claim of royal descent are based on this temporal conception where the present and future fulfill an eternal cosmic order. The royal forebears are thought to pass judgment on present affairs, thereby sanctioning the prestige and privilege of their descendants at present and in perpetuity.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, such power is sanctioned by church officials such as *Aba Mogese*,<sup>86</sup> for whom honor inherited by blood is recognized by the divine.<sup>87</sup>

Instead of being presented as a tragic heroic figure whose power declines with time,<sup>88</sup> however, Meshesha is ultimately portrayed satirically in the novel. His claim to royal greatness is done to the point of extremity.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, his victory over Asege is ironically reversed, heightening this sardonic effect.

The last-minute intervention of the priests on behalf of the patron saint<sup>90</sup> of both Dima and Bichena, Saint George, to plead with Meshesha to forgive Asege's

<sup>83</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *Kebrna Nagast: The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek* (London: Medici Society Limited, 1922), 42.

<sup>84</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 74.

<sup>85</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 100–01.

<sup>86</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 273.

<sup>87</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 194.

<sup>88</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 100–01.

<sup>89</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 103.

<sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that the Amharic word for *patron saint*, ታቦቲ, is also the word for the *Ark of the Covenant*, a replica of which is required in every Ethiopian Orthodox church. The replicas in the

transgression and to call off the duel adds a mystical element to Meshesha's established but waning legendary prestige as a warrior, the fabled glory of which leads Asege to hyperbolically identify Meshesha himself as a patron saint.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, the tales about Meshesha's former strength and valor are fantastical, incredible stories about his wrestling lions to the ground with his bare hands, jumping from one galloping horse onto another, and the like.<sup>92</sup> Further, the intervention of the priests is portrayed at first with the same sense of prophetic time associated with Meshesha's lineage: “ያንላት [ፈታውራሪ መሸሻ] ለመፈጸም ታጥቀው የመጡላት በደል በአዳም እስከ ዘራዝርኦቹ ሞት ካስፈረደበት በደል የሚመዘዘን መሆኑን ከሊቃውንቱ አፍ ሲሰሙ ... እግዚአብሔር በእለተ ምጻት በግርማ መለኮቱ ወርዶ በሀጥአን ስለሚፈረደው ፍርድ አባ ሞገሴ ሲሰጥኩዎቻው የኖሩት ያንላት በሰቸው የተፈጸመ መስሎቸው ይንቀጠቀጡ ነበር。”<sup>93</sup> Even further, Meshesha's journey to the duel is filled with prophesy and auguries.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Meshesha chooses the day of the duel to be on St. George's Day to invoke the saint's intervention on his behalf,<sup>95</sup> Meshesha's choice, thus, appears to prefigure what is fulfilled by divine providence, a narrative structure based on prophetic time that we encountered previously in the *Kebrā Nagast*. Afterward, Meshesha and others look back at these events as miraculous,<sup>96</sup> as symbolizing the former's glory and as being predestined, resulting from his patrician courage and resoluteness.<sup>97</sup>

Despite these qualities that may lead us to read this part of the novel as adopting a style and structure characteristic of epic narratives, the story of Meshesha and Asege's conflict ends on a satirical note with the revelation that the priests intervened not due to divine providence or Asege's fearful entreaties but *Qegnazmach* Akalu's (Meshesha's relative and loyal subject) plan to prevent the duel and Meshesha's almost certain defeat and death. Only Asege and the heads of the two churches are privy to his plan to have the priests intervene,<sup>98</sup> leaving Meshesha and others in his house to continue to ignorantly revel in Meshesha's courage and Asege's cowardice. Like Meshesha's self-aggrandizement, the ultimate revelation that Meshesha's “victory” is a result of the secretive intervention of someone from his own house ironically undermines his stature. More, it reverses the epic narrative style to that of satire, ironically subverting notions of prophesy and prophetic temporality

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St. George churches of both Dima and Bichena are brought to the site of the duel to invoke the presence of the patron saint.

<sup>91</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 141.

<sup>92</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 143.

<sup>93</sup> When [*Fitawrari* Meshesha] heard from the priests' mouths that the offense he was about to commit that day was on par with the offense that brought the curse of death onto Adam and all his children ... he started shaking because it seemed to him that he had incurred what *Aba* Mogese had long taught him about the Last Judgment, where God, in all his divine glory, descends to pass judgement on the sinful. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 169–70.

<sup>94</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 156–59.

<sup>95</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 156.

<sup>96</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 176.

<sup>97</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 174.

<sup>98</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 192.

associated with the former genre by centering the role of earthly circumstance, human agency, and contingency in the chain of events.<sup>99</sup>

This satirical subversion<sup>100</sup> sheds *FM*'s ties to epics such as the *Kebra Nagast* by undermining this mode's narratological and philosophical underpinnings in favor of the realist modes of novels and modern histories. Indeed, the novel shrouds the events in mystery only to finally reveal Akalu's role, dissipating any sense of awe sustained thus far. This demystifying narrative flow is a recurring one and is connected to the way the novel straddles different narrative modes. Moreover, it is reminiscent of Vico's modern and secular conception of history as made by and therefore *knowable* to humans, a conception at odds with those of traditional epics and royal chronicles.

This formal and thematic tension between the old and the new is expressed by Gudu Kassa as follows:

የማህበራችን አቋም የተሰራበት ስራት ልማዱ ወጉ ህጉ እንደህይወታዊ ስራተ ማህበር ሳይሆን ህይወት እንደሌለው የድንጋይ ካብ አንዱ ባንዱ ላይ ተደራርቦ የላይኛው የታችኛውን ተጭኖ የታችኛው የላይኛውን ተሸክሞ እንዲኖር ሆኖ የተሰራ በሙሉ ከጊዜ ብዛት የታችኛው ማፈንገጡ ስለማይቀርና ይህ ሲሆን ህንጻው በሙሉ እንዳይፈረስ እንደገና ተሻሽሎ ሰውን ከድንጋይ በተሻለ ሙልክ የሚያሳይ የህያዋን አቁዋመ ማህበር እንዲሰራ ያስፈልጋል። የዛሬው ስራተ ማህበራችን ሲሰራ በዚያን ጊዜ ለነበረው ማህበር እንዲህ ሆኖ መሰራቱ ጠቃሚ ኖሮ ይሆናል። ነገር ግን ለዛሬው ማህበር ጠቃሚ አለመሆኑ የታወቀ ነው። የሆነ ሆኖ ማናቸውም ስራት ማህበሩ ለዚያው ለማህበራዊ ኑሮው እንዲያገለግለው ሰው የሰራው ሲሆን ማህበሩን ባርያ አድርጎ እንዲገዛው መሆኑ ጣኦት ሰርቶ የሰሩትን ጣኦት በፈጣሪ ቦታ እንደ ማስቀመጥና እንደ ማምለክ ነው።<sup>101</sup>

This passage succinctly conveys the tension between the ethos of the traditional order and the ethos of modernity. By analogizing the traditional order to “a lifeless dry-stone wall” and describing it as archaic and oppressive, Gudu Kassa articulates a major theme that pervades the novel's very narratological structure. He

<sup>99</sup> This reversal completes the break from the epic narrative mode as its ultimate revelation of the significance and even wisdom of human agency contrasts with the formal and thematic qualities of the *Kebra Nagast* that propagate the doctrine that “God has made foolishness the wisdom of this world.” Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 42.

<sup>100</sup> There is a similar reversal in Meshesha's military campaign against the peasant uprisings, led by Abeje Belew, on his fiefs. The account is reversed from legend to comic satire and Meshesha from being a heroic defender against bandits to being a villainous bandit himself. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 276–303.

<sup>101</sup> The structure of our society, with its laws and customs, rather than being like a living social order, is built like a lifeless dry stone wall where the stones above press down on those at the bottom and the bottom carries the full weight of the top. In time, it is inevitable that those at the bottom will jut out and the whole edifice will come crumbling down and, to avoid this, it must be rebuilt as an order of the living where humans are elevated from the status of stone. Today's social order may have been beneficial for the society of the times in which it was built. However, it is obvious that it is not beneficial for today's society. After all, every social order is constructed by society and by man to serve his social life, and the fact that the order has been made to enslave society is like creating an idol and worshipping it in place of the creator. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 122.

advocates instead for “an order of the living” that affirms people’s capacity to form their social order freely and collectively, thereby making their own history. This “philosophical break from the past,” as Samir Amin puts it, is how the modern era, “an era of freedom but also of insecurity,” began.<sup>102</sup>

Also note the tropes of life and death. The lack of personal vitality and liberty in Bezabih and Seble’s lives is reflected here in the lack of social dynamism and freedom in the traditional order, linking the tensions and reversals in narrative time with those in the narrative mode.

In my view, these modern ideals render Gudu Kassa an anachronistic character, especially considering his only having gone through traditional schooling.<sup>103</sup> Besides acting as a foil to Meshesha’s aristocratic and volatile temperament, Gudu Kassa seems to reflect the author’s modern subjectivity.<sup>104</sup> I disagree with those that see Gudu Kassa as representing tradition’s “immanent” or self-critique<sup>105</sup> because his critique is not limited to the *excesses* of Meshesha’s power/privilege.<sup>106</sup> His critique is a *qualitative* one aimed at the doctrine that humans do not make their own history and are subject to the cosmic order under which they live,<sup>107</sup> a doctrine that was necessary “for the reproduction of precapitalist [tributary] social systems.”<sup>108</sup>

Kassa’s radical difference is marked by the derisive epithet of *gudu* used against him, which translates to unusual/odd. Moreover, others dismiss and even condemn his most profound criticisms.<sup>109</sup> Gudu Kassa’s universal rejection<sup>110</sup> signals that he should be read as the modern subject’s adversarial apprehension of the novel’s concrete referent, the traditional way of life, indicative of the split of “the writer’s creative consciousness” discussed earlier, or as anticipating the sensibilities of the modern novel reader. He may also be read as allegorizing modernity’s advance into the cultural realm of the feudal order.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Samir Amin, “Economic Globalism and Political Universalism: Conflicting Issues?” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 1.3 (2000): 590.

<sup>103</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 121.

<sup>104</sup> If Gudu Kassa is radically critical of traditional cultural aspects that legitimize power, Meshesha is immersed in them to the point of extremity. Meshesha’s idiosyncratic detachment from the mundane world (facilitated by Akalu’s role of actual administrator of his fiefs) and his arrogant belief in the legends about him and the aristocracy lead to his excessive exercise of power and, ironically, threaten the class status of his house and the reproduction of peasant life on his fiefs. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 255–57.

<sup>105</sup> Maimire Mennasemay, “Fiqer eskä Mäqaber: A Qiné Hermeneutical Reading,” *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10.1–2 (2016): 8–9.

<sup>106</sup> Maimire, “Fiqer eskä Mäqaber: A Qiné Hermeneutical Reading,” 8.

<sup>107</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 463.

<sup>108</sup> Amin, “Economic Globalism and Political Universalism: Conflicting Issues?” 590.

<sup>109</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 222, 275, 334–35.

<sup>110</sup> Even Seble and Bezabih, characters that Gudu Kassa influences the most, ultimately shed their insights and adopt a fatalistic subjectivity.

<sup>111</sup> As evidence, we can cite Gudu Kassa’s comments quoted previously about the traditional order’s obsolescence. Additionally, the presence of imported luxury items such as cognac in Meshesha’s house indicate the advent of modernity and the expanding presence of the world market. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 279.

What is more, Gudu Kassa draws attention to the author's concerns regarding the immediate historical context of his novel's publication, concerns made explicit in Haddis's short political text *Ityopya Min Aynet Astedader Yasfeligatal?* (*What Kind of Administration Does Ethiopia Need?*).<sup>112</sup> The attempted coup of 1960 greatly troubled Haddis, which he viewed as a historic warning sign of discontent with the traditional system,<sup>113</sup> stressing the need for its radical transformation and the impossibility of returning to “የጥንቱ የኑሮ ሥራ-ት,” the ancient order of life, if worse violent uprisings were to be avoided.<sup>114</sup> Haddis even echoes Gudu Kassa's words when stating that governments are formed by people and are not created and imposed by a mysterious hand of obscure origin.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to the epic, *FM* alludes to the *gedl*, a hagiographic tradition that began in Ethiopia early on with translations from foreign sources, eventually leading to the production of texts about native saints.<sup>116</sup> Direct references to the *gedl* in *FM* include Kelemework's copying a section of a *gedl* “ታምረ ጊዮርጊስ,” *The Miracles of St. George*,<sup>117</sup> an integral part of the *gedl* narrative structure,<sup>118</sup> with the aim of selling it to a monastery, indicating the monastic significance of such texts.<sup>119</sup>

More interestingly, however, the novel contains less explicit references to the *gedl* in connection to *Aba Tekle Haymanot*, a widely revered monk<sup>120</sup> that Meshesha enlists to exorcise Seble from Bezabih's “enchantments.”<sup>121</sup> The monk's cryptic narration of how he miraculously received his exorcising cross from God by standing in prayer on one leg for fifteen days<sup>122</sup> may be interpreted as a reference to the *The Life of Takla Haymanot*, a thirteenth-century Ethiopian saint, who, besides bearing the same name as the character, performs the similar but grander miracle of standing in prayer on one leg for seven years after his other leg breaks due to having stood on both for even longer.<sup>123</sup>

Even more interestingly, in a section that has bewildered critics, the novel temporarily but thoroughly adopts the style and structure of the narrative mode of the *gedl* in its account of Seble's flight from her home disguised as a monk in *Aba Tekle Haymanot*'s garbs. Her identity is momentarily disguised not only from

<sup>112</sup> A previous version of this text was submitted to the emperor following the 1960 coup attempt. Alemu, “A Short Political Biography of Kibur Ato Haddis Alemayehu,” 33.

<sup>113</sup> Haddis Alemayehu, *Ityopya Min Aynet Astedader Yasfeligatal?* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1974), i, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Haddis, *Ityopya Min Aynet Astedader Yasfeligatal?*, i. Gudu Kassa echoes this idea about transformation. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 334.

<sup>115</sup> Haddis, *Ityopya Min Aynet Astedader Yasfeligatal?*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Tesfaye Gebre Mariam, “A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymanot,” *African Languages and Cultures* 10.2 (1997): 181.

<sup>117</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 351–52.

<sup>118</sup> Tesfaye, “A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymanot,” 183.

<sup>119</sup> For a historical discussion of this significance, see Tesfaye, “A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymanot,” 181, 182.

<sup>120</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 418–19.

<sup>121</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 410–11.

<sup>122</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 420.

<sup>123</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Life of Takla Haymanot* (London: Privately Printed for Lady Meux, 1906), 271.

other characters but also the reader as she travels under the name of *Aba Alem Lemine*, which translates to “why should I covet the world,” a name seen as authentically monkish.<sup>124</sup> This sense of mystery is compounded by Seble’s seemingly miraculous encounters when wandering in the wilderness of the Blue Nile Gorge, an area portrayed in mythic terms as hellishly fearsome.<sup>125</sup> Forced to spend a night there, she encounters a leopard and then a lion, managing to escape by climbing a large tree when the two animals confront each other.<sup>126</sup> When Seble relates this encounter to others, it is viewed as a sign of divine intervention on Seble’s behalf: “እንዴት ግሩም ነው እባክህ! ገረመንፈስ ቅዱስ በክንፉ አውቶቸው ነው እንጂ!”; “መለኩሴ አደሉ! ፈጣሪያቸው ቅዱስ ገብርኤል ጠሎታቸውን ሰምቶላቸዋል ጣድቃን ቢሆኑ ነው!”<sup>127</sup> The lion is even viewed as an allegory of divine protection that saves Seble from the leopard: “ገብሬል በለተቀኑ ታምራት ነው የሰራልዎ! የሚጣፍ ነው!”<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in typical *gedl* fashion, each of Seble’s escapes from danger is preceded by her praying.<sup>129</sup>

This curious section has been received with incomprehension and disapproval. Taye, for instance, views it as “a pointless diversion that lowers ... the novel to the level of light entertainment.”<sup>130</sup> Moreover, Sahle Selassie considers its lack of immediate disclosure of *Aba Alem Lemine*’s identity to the reader as unnecessarily confusing.<sup>131</sup> These critics, however, fail to recognize that this momentary shift in style and structure is linked to the novel’s allusions to and adoption of the *gedl* mode of writing. This appearance of mystery and miracle is created by Seble’s seemingly authentic monastic disguise and her dangerous encounters that seem like signs of divine trials and deliverance,<sup>132</sup> which are a major structural feature of *gedl* narratives. As Kidane Wold Kifle’s definition of the Ge’ez term *gedl* reminds us, the word denotes “hardships, struggles and trials undergone by believers in order to obtain victory and salvation in their life hereafter.”<sup>133</sup> Additionally, I interpret this account as specifically alluding to and even imitating *Gedle Tekle Haymanot, The Life of Takla Haymanot*. In addition to Seble traveling in *Aba Tekle Haymanot*’s garbs and stating her aim of reaching Addis Ababa for St. Tekle Haymanot’s Day to receive a monastic title,<sup>134</sup> we can

<sup>124</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 537.

<sup>125</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 492. This place is portrayed further on with language that is similarly fearsome and even prophetic of doom by referring to its lack of modern infrastructure and thus accessibility to people. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 531. Also note that Bezabih meets his end here.

<sup>126</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 494–98.

<sup>127</sup> “The Holy Spirit must have hoisted him up there with his wings!; he must be a saintly monk since his creator St. Gabriel has answered his prayers!” Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 500.

<sup>128</sup> “St. Gabriel has performed a miracle for you on his Day! This should surely be written!” Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 518.

<sup>129</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 495, 499, 509.

<sup>130</sup> Taye, “Form in the Amharic Novel,” 149.

<sup>131</sup> Sahle Selassie Berhane Mariam, review of *Fikir iske Mekabir*, by Haddis Alemayehu, *Weyeyet* 2.1 (1968–1969), quoted in Taye, “Form in the Amharic Novel,” 172.

<sup>132</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 520–21.

<sup>133</sup> Kidane Wold Kifle, *Metshafe Sewasew Wegiss Wemezgebe Kalat Haddis* (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing, 1948), quoted in Tesfaye “A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymanot,” 182.

<sup>134</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 509–10.

cite her encounter with the leopard, which is highly reminiscent of one of St. Tekle Haymanot's miracles: the saint saves a would-be monk traveling alone in open country from a leopard attack, a trial that is a consequence of the monk's desire to marry, and guides him to wholly adopting the monastic way of life.<sup>135</sup>

The disguise is finally shed when Seble comes across Bezabih on his deathbed, a revelation occurring simultaneously with Seble and Bezabih's mutual recognition, the former having assumed the guise of a monk and the latter having been rendered nearly unrecognizable by disfiguring wounds.<sup>136</sup> Among the numerous reversals here, one is that Bezabih's "fate" of an ascetic life, one he desperately resists, is ultimately realized not only in himself<sup>137</sup> but in the woman he desires to marry as Seble adopts monasticism after his death.<sup>138</sup> A further irony, however, is that the novel disentangles<sup>139</sup> from the narrative mode associated with monasticism, the *gedl*, because the narrative's subjects wish to free themselves from their forced celibacy. Indeed, Seble is hardly the saintly monastic figure she is previously made out to be and is compelled into monasticism by social customs that prevent her from marrying Bezabih, to whom she remains loyal even after his death.<sup>140</sup> As for her wish to serve God to absolve herself of divine judgment for her parents' death, Gudu Kassa, in characteristic fashion, stresses her parents' own role for their fate.<sup>141</sup> This is accompanied by the narrative's convergence on Seble and Bezabih's bodily, as opposed to ideal, presence when they uncover each other's identity: "ባሰብ አይደለም በገሀድ ባካል ሊደዩት ነው! ባይነ ህሊና ደዩት ባካል የሚደዩት እንደሆነ ምን ሊውጣቸው ነው?"<sup>142</sup> thus bridging the distance between the narrator and the characters.

This is what I have identified previously as a demystifying narrative flow that is connected to the novel's movement between different narrative modes and its advocacy of the modern philosophy of history. It reveals that the tragic resolution of Seble and Bezabih's story is not a result of them being followed by prophesy but of them being "hounded by history,"<sup>143</sup> whose laws they break and who, in turn, are broken by agents of its conservation.

<sup>135</sup> Budge, *The Life of Takla Haymanot*, 299–301. These references are not only relevant to the novel's treatment of monasticism. See Tadesse, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 163–67, for a historical discussion of the relation between this saint and monasticism. These references also pertain to the novel's sociopolitical themes as St. Tekle Haymanot is traditionally associated with the "restoration" of the Solomonic Dynasty from the Zagwe Dynasty. Yohannes Kema, *Gedle Tekle Haymanot* (Addis Ababa: Tinsae Zeguba'e Printing Press, 1997), 66–75.

<sup>136</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 541–42.

<sup>137</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 474–76.

<sup>138</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 549–51.

<sup>139</sup> The reversal of *Aba Tekle Haymanot's* portrayal from a saintly monk to a lying drunkard is part of this ironic disassociation. Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 428, 485.

<sup>140</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 550.

<sup>141</sup> Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 551.

<sup>142</sup> She is about to see him overtly, in the flesh! What will become of her if what she sees in the flesh is the same as what she saw in her mind's eye? Haddis, *Fikir iske Mekabir*, 541. (The narrator, as do others mentioned previously, refers to Seble using the nongendered third-person verb inflection used to refer to people with seniority, thus maintaining her disguise as a monk. I use the pronoun "she" here for the sake of clarity.)

<sup>143</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), 262.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have offered an alternative interpretation to previous readings of Haddis's classic novel *FM* and its relation to realism, readings driven by the ideological/normative aim of affirming the novel as a consequentially "modern" one. By adopting a more dialectical approach, I show that the emergence of realism in the novel is accompanied by its breakdown, something that reflects the thematic concern of portraying lived experience under the traditional order as marked by the assertion and dissolution of individual autonomy as it runs into societal limits. Moreover, the novel's alternation and ironic juxtaposition of realism with the narrative modes of the epic and the *gedl* draw attention to the historicity of the traditional order and lived experience under it. The novel thereby lays bare the philosophical basis of the traditional order's reproduction as a socio-historical system, a philosophy that conceives of humans as subject to the dictates of the cosmic order under which they live and ultimately advocates for a modern conception of history that frees humans from this position and recognizes them as the makers of their own history.

**Competing interest.** None.

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