Bearing Witness to Malignity

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Hannah Giorgis is an emerging voice in African diaspora circles, but also in the wider international scene for her miscellanea of journalistic pieces. She writes mainly movie and book reviews, women and human rights advocative pieces that take up a broad array of issues such as race relations, women's oppression, blacklives matters and many others. Much of her journalistic work has been published in magazines such as; *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The FADER*, the *Lifted Brow Literary Journal*. My first encounter with "A Double-Edged Inheritance" was during my reading of *Addis Ababa Noir*, a 2020 anthology of crime noir short stories, edited by the Ethiopian-American writer, Maaza Mengiste.

In synopsis, "A Double-Edged Inheritance," is a story of Meskerem, a brilliant young Ethiopian-American woman, who returns to Addis Ababa for the funeral of her pragmatic and scholarly grand aunt, Almaz Gessesse, only to come to a shocking and fateful discovery that eventually leads her to murder her father. The narrator's laconic narrative voice, characterization and beautifully crafted diction, tacitly invite us to a deep conversation on a multiplicity of issues such as love, class, women's vulnerability in a male dominated society, power, and the sinister underside of those who are powerful, untouchable, and rich. Giorgis calls us to bear witness to the indifference and malignity of those who are too powerful, and how far they can go when their reputation is threatened.

The story opens with the return of the protagonist, Meskerem, to Ethiopia. She comes to learn that she is a child born out of wedlock, which is against the mores and values of a predominantly

conservative Coptic Ethiopia. In the narrator's free indirect discourse, "This child would be born into blame; this child would need protection." Giorgis enables us to decode the regressive parochialism that continues to plague women in Ethiopian society. As a consequence of this romance, Meskerem's mother, the brilliant Tigist Negash, is condemned and cast off by her conservative and moralistic family for falling in love with a general's son and getting pregnant out of wedlock. Giorgis rebukes a society that expects women to adhere to the often oppressive and submissive orthodoxy of conservative mores, and yet, refuse to recognize their free will. To take an example, Professor Almaz, is judged as an unconventional woman because she chooses to pursue her career at the expense of marriage. She lives alone in an apartment and does not "behave like an Ethiopian woman should." In stark contrast, the wife of General Robel, Meskerem's father, is not mentioned; the narrator observes, "[the] general's wife didn't seem to have a name or many original thoughts.… When the house staff cleared up after dessert and the general's wife retired to her parlor.…" This shows that women are expected to occupy submissive roles and are not expected to think for themselves but rather parrot the views of their husbands. In a recent but short interview with *Oprah Daily*, Giorgis acknowledges as much when she states that her writing of this story was influenced by her "thinking of what we expect of women culturally, and asking them to do." I think she succeeds in this mission when she presents resilient and courageous women characters who refuse to accept the status quo.

Meskerem's murder of her father is emotionally motivated by the urge to revenge the gruesome treatment of her mother by her grandfather. This of course satisfies the reader's genre expectations of a crime noir story. However, what the reader should resist is a superficial reading of her murder of General Robel as merely criminal, but rather see her action as a protest against the patterns of injustice against women in misogynistic societies. Here, I see a parallel of Meskerem's murder of General Robel with that of Tess's murder of Alec in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Just like Tess's murders Alec to protest against the injustices of social class and women's domination in Victorian England, Meskerem murders General Robel as a means to protest the social class division, authority and male domination of women in Ethiopia.

Embedded in the sub-plot of Tigist Negash and Robel is the role social status and money play in human relationships. Unlike in most rich-boy poor-girl narratives, where love triumphs over class and money, and the heroine is often accepted into the rich boy's family, in "A Double-Edge Inheritance," the plot is twisted to show that such affairs often lead to gruesome violence, heartbreak and displacement. The main lesson and central theme of the narrative is articulated perhaps in the narrator's warning: "Powerful men were dangerous, their lust for dominion more potent than any love they might claim to feel for women."

In terms of style, Giorgis's sentences are embedded with meaning and significance. For example, the opening sentence of the narrative, "Meskerem didn't believe in fate," draws the reader's attention to the character of the protagonist and distinguishes her from her earlier generation of aunties who seem to accept their oppression passively. Indeed, by the second last sentence of the first paragraph, fate is envisioned as "the last refuge of the weak and uninspired." This, of course, anticipates Meskerem's dramatic decision to kill her father at the end of the narrative. She takes issues into her hands and seeks for justice in a world where justice seems not to exist. A reader of this text must also pay close attention to Giorgis's use of Amharic nomenclature, words, and expressions. Many of the character's names have symbolic value in Amharic.

Meskerem's name has connotations with the Ethiopian season of September and, of course, we learn from the narrator that Meskerem was born earlier than expected on September 11, which, according to the Ethiopian tradition, is the beginning of the season of *Meskerem*. *Meskerem* in Amharic tradition symbolizes the spirit of peace, love and reconciliation. It is ironic that a name that stands for all that is good is associated with violence rather than reconciliation at the end of the

narrative. Almaz is also a name given to women and it means “Diamond” or something rare and precious. Indeed, Professor Almaz is seen as an exceptional woman within the Ethiopian community. The name Girma has connotations of “majesty,” opulence and authority. It is no surprise that General Girma uses his power to oppress those he thinks are tarnishing his family’s reputation. Though the meaning of the text is not lost on a non-Ethiopian reader without knowledge of Amharic, the reader of course will have to use google translator or risk grappling with Amharic words and expressions.

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