[REVIEW]: Meron Hadero's Sense of Hope

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
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This is the second time Meron Hadero, the Ethiopian American writer, has been shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing. She made the shortlist in 2019 with her heartbreaking story "The Wall," though Lesley Nneka Arimah, the Nigerian American, would win the prize with "Skinned," a riveting, eerie story about gender inequality. Hadero is interested in interracial relationships, and this interest is evident in the stories she tells. "The Wall" is set in a rural American community and explores the relationship between an Ethiopian refugee and a German professor. On the other hand, "The Street Sweep" takes place in Addis Ababa and describes the relationship between an Ethiopian street sweeper and an American aid worker. Ethiopia is Africa's second-most populous country, after Nigeria, though one of its regions, Tigray, is embroiled in violent ethnic strife.

In "The Street Sweep," Hadero weaves a delicate story of hope, but hope raised and dashed. The story features Getu, a young sweeper, his mother, and Jeff Johnson, an American expatriate. Getu is brilliant but naïve and trusting; his mother is cynical and distrustful of foreigners, and Jeff is cheery and unreliable. Hadero narrates with an understated irony the racial dynamics between Ethiopians and Euro-American relief workers on the continent. She deftly uses irony to criticize capitalist aspirations of postcolonial Africa. She depicts Ethiopia as a rentier state, where farms are corporatized, and neighbourhoods gentrified; a country of paradox: forward-looking and yet regressive. Consequently, Hadero shows us two worlds, dialectical at best: one of ease and comfort, enjoyed by foreigners, and the other of lack and precarity, experienced by locals. The "new" Ethiopia, depicted in her story, has no space for the poor and their "homes made of cloth and rags and wood." This depiction typifies the irony at the heart of capitalist modernity pursued by the neocolonial elite.

The actions take place primarily at the Sheraton, an "expansive, expensive hotel" that looms "above all else on a hill in the city center." The edifice is an epitome of modernity—and its grip on the people's imagination is tenacious. In the story, the Sheraton figures as both metaphor and materiality, a fantastic space for hedonism, and a stark reminder of class distinction. It is, indeed, fitting that this hotel that "created a sense of hope" is where Getu learns about the fragility of hope

and trust.

“The Street Sweep” opens with Getu struggling with a tie as he prepares to attend the farewell party of Jeff Johnson, a man with whom he is friends—or so, he believes. He can’t knot his tie properly, so he gives up after several failed attempts: “the knot unraveled in his hands.” This scene subtly illustrates his futile efforts to appear modern and belong in the cosmopolitan space. Getu and his mother live in a desolate area of the city, which the government will soon raze as part of its gentrification project—unless its occupants build a four-story building. That is the latest legislation in the country.

However, Getu has a plan. He is hopeful that he can convince Jeff Johnson to “save their home,” so he hinges his salvation on friendship and reciprocity. Getu strongly believes, even against the wisdom of his mother, that Jeff Johnson is their saviour. His relationship with the American can help halt their displacement. He is, after all, Jeff Johnson’s “man on the street,” whose knowledge is instrumental in solidifying the foreigner’s social capital amongst his cohort. Hadero references the trope of the white saviour complex, personified by foreign aid workers, reminiscent of Binyavanga Wainana’s “pragmatic and good-hearted expats,” described in his critically acclaimed essay published in *Granta* 92.

Getu’s mother never believes in expats, for she views their NGOs as scams. To her, Jeff Johnson and his kind have nothing to offer Ethiopians except “vitamins,” “books,” and “soaps,” especially in the new Ethiopia the government is constructing. She insists that these people “breeze through the country,” acting as “storms,” and resisting connections with the locals. She implies that American and European relief workers are agents of destruction rather than transformation because they are “the floods that washed out the roads in the south of the country each rainy season.”

Similarly, Getu’s mother knows that there can be no genuine relationship between her son and “the Mr. Jeffs of the world” because “Only a man who has spent every day here having his shoes licked and every door flung open would be so unaware as to invite a boy like you *to the Sheraton*. To the Sheraton!” Yet, Getu sees a friend in Jeff Johnson, imagining him as influential in society, whereas the latter regards him as a mere streetside aide to be used for personal gains. The contradiction underlying both men’s perspective on relationship illustrates the ruses of friendship based on convenience or contingency. Hadero stresses this theme in her narrative, demonstrating that relationships between Africans and Euro-Americans are usually tenuous and superficial. Moreover, such relationships tend to be asymmetrical and manipulative, even exploitative, much to the detriment of Africans. This is where her critique of interracial relationships is precise and powerful, for Jeff Johnson and his clique embody superficiality.

Another strength of Hadero’s story is in the cadence of her narrative: her prose is uncluttered, rhythmic, and radiant. Hadero is adept at coaxing readers along at a slow but tense pace. She delivers a thoroughly enjoyable story, though this reader wishes that she had subverted his expectations around Jeff Johnson’s character, in particular. From the beginning of the story, Getu’s mother foreshadows the disappointment her son would encounter in his dealing with Jeff Johnson. Therefore, it comes as little surprise when the American ultimately disappoints her son. The act of disappointment, which Jeff Johnson attributes to misinformation on the part of Getu, confirms Getu’s mother’s impression of foreigners. This impression presents Jeff Johnson as an archetype of the exploitative Westerner for whom Africa is “an isle of exclusive luxury.” Nevertheless, this does not undercut the magnetic pull of the prose.

Overall, “The Street Sweep” stages a symbolic encounter between innocence and experience, hope and resignation, optimism and cynicism; a power relation between Blacks and whites. Though Hadero sets her story in Ethiopia, other Africans still will relate to its central theme of displacement,

especially since she portrays precarious lives or the underclass in a nation that has its vision set rigidly on a future without inclusion.

Uche Peter Umezurike holds a PhD in English and Film Studies from the University of Alberta. An alumnus of the International Writing Program, Iowa, USA, he is a co-editor of *Wreaths for Wayfarers*, an anthology of poems. His children's book *Wish Maker* is forthcoming from Masobe Books, Nigeria in fall 2021.