This is a book of memories that lingers on long after it is read. Right from the start, in a short engaging prologue, Abraham Verghese takes us with him in the retelling of a touching portrait of an Indian family that made Ethiopia its home, and the lives and tortured relationships of two identical twins born of an Indian nun and a British surgeon, who runs away in shame and disgrace for having fathered by a nun sworn to a life of poverty, celibacy and obedience. This is a book that deals with big themes: forbidden love; sex; faith, guilt and shame; the purpose-driven life; and devotion to one’s country of birth. It is, above all, about betrayal and redemption, and love that transcends geography, ethnicity and blood lines.

The Story
The great writers usually engage the reader right from the start with powerful introductory lines or paragraphs. Tolstoy is perhaps the best example as can be seen from his well-known, stunning one-sentence opening paragraph and the immediately following paragraph in Anna Karenina. He eschewed static introductions and colourful background paintings and plunged the reader directly into the middle of an action among persons unfamiliar to him ‘so that the reader would be drawn into their situation like a participant, and not remain aloof like a mere observer.’ Verghese, too, throws us directly into the middle of the action in the first few sentences and evocative prologue by telling us the shock, disbelief and commotion at Missing Hospital, Addis Ababa, caused by the fact that Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a much loved nurse and a nun sworn to a life of celibacy, had been, unknown to all those closest to her, pregnant and was now in the throes of cataclysmic labour which was endangering both her life and her unborn twin babies.

Of Tizita, Saints and Sinners
Assefa Bequele
Cutting for Stone
by Abraham Verghese
ISBN 9780099443636

The story is narrated by one of the twins, Marion Stone, now 50 and a respected surgeon, to render some order to the events of his life and the mysteries that surrounded his birth, and to express his gratitude to his estranged twin brother Shiva for ‘the gift of yet another sunrise’. It is above all an effort to exercise old ghosts and heal old wounds. ‘Only the telling can heal the rift that separates my brother and me. Yes, I have an infinite faith in the craft of surgery, but no surgeon can heal the kind of wound that divides two bothers. Where silk and steel fail, story must succeed.’

The twin brothers were born at Missing Hospital, Addis Ababa, in the very room where their mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, ‘spent most of her working hours, and in which she had been most fulfilled’. In a beautiful paragraph that is likely to be amusing and familiar to the Ethiopian ear and a damning but correct commentary on our cavalier attitude towards precision and attention to details, Marion tells us that ‘Missing was really Mission Hospital, a word that on the Ethiopian tongue came out with a hiss so it sounded like “Missing”’. A clerk in the Ministry of Health who was a fresh high-school graduate had typed out THE MISSING HOSPITAL on the license, a phonetically correct spelling as far as he was concerned. A reporter for the Ethiopian Herald perpetuated the misspelling. When Matron Hirst had approached the clerk in the ministry to correct this, he pulled out his original typescript. ‘See for yourself, madam. Quod erat demonstrandum it is Missing’, he said, ‘as if he’d proved Pythagoras’s Theorem, the sun’s central position in the solar system, the roundness of the earth, and Missing’s precise location at its imagined corner. And so Missing it was.’

Sister Mary Joseph Praise stayed and worked at Missing hospital in the presence of Thomas Stone, a respected British surgeon. The two were close and worked together in perfect harmony; they were ‘pure ballet’, ‘a heavenly pair’. But when his assistant of seven years, a nun of the Diocesan Carmelite Order of Madras, unexpectedly went into labour, Thomas Stone, the man who everyone believed to be the father, didn’t know or suspect she was pregnant! But there she was, bleeding profusely and dying of child birth. When he, therefore, saw her lustreless eyes, her lips turned blue, in agony and quickly fading away, he was overwhelmed with fear of losing the woman he secretly loved. He ‘could do nothing but call and repeat her name. From his lips, Sister Mary Joseph Praise’s name sounded like an interrogation, then an endearment, then a confession of love spun out of one word. Mary? Mary, Mary?’

In spite of all their efforts, all the three physicians who lived and worked together at Missing Hospital – Stone, Dr Kalpana Hemlatha (Hema), and Dr Ghosh – were unable to save her. Stone was totally devastated. And, he who had been asking for a miracle to save her was not moved by the sight of the twins. In fact, he detested them and wouldn’t look at them. He left the room, run away, no one knew where, and was never heard from.

For Dr Kalpna Hemlatha, or, Hema as she was known, the death of Sister Mary Joseph Praise while giving life to these two infants was worse than tragic. It was madness, and the ‘only sensible response to the madness of life was to cultivate a kind of madness within’ and, in a scene reminiscent of Zorba the Greek, she started dancing and dancing and dancing ‘to the music
in her mind’). But she finally saw the beauty of having these two infants and said to herself that she had won ‘the lottery without buying a ticket’ and that ‘these two babies had plugged a hole in her heart that she didn’t know she had.’ She became their mother. She named them Marion and Shiva, and ‘finally, reluctantly, almost as an afterthought, but because you cannot escape your destiny, and so that he wouldn’t walk away from her, she added our surname, the name of the man who had left the room: Stone.’

Marion tells us of a warm and loving family and a happy childhood—he and Shiva falling asleep, ‘arms around each other, breathing on each other’s face, heads touching’, growing up with and like other Ethiopian-ethnicity’s children; enjoying the free and inclusive Ethiopian-Western social life; and exposed to culture and good education. Above all they grew up very much loved, respected, and adored by many sights. Marion was the more thoughtful, obviously emotional, and inhibited especially about sex. Shiva, on the other hand, was the more detached, rational, practical and driving. Although still in his teens, he had more experience with sex and no qualms about sleeping with any woman.

The twins were extremely close; they were one. ‘All one of us had to do was think of an action and the odds are the other would rise to carry it out’. He and Shiva were also different. Marion was the more thoughtful, obviously emotional, and inhibited especially about sex. Shiva, on the other hand, was the more detached, rational, practical and driving. Although still in his teens, he had more experience with sex and no qualms about sleeping with any woman.

Marion describes Shiva as a genius, impatient with school, someone who did not subscribe to convention but knew more medicine, certainly more gynaecology, than many a trained physician and was formed into a brilliant surgeon, thanks to his non-formal training and apprenticeship under Hema’s supervision. Marion had an exceptional gift, but Shiva lived in the now, without bothering about the consequences of his action. As close as he was to his brother and as harmless and totally decent as he was, he did eventually commit an act of betrayal which left a deep wound and rift that eventually committed an act of betrayal which left a deep wound and rift that eventually committed an act of betrayal which left a deep wound and rift that separated the two brothers. It was while this wound and estrangement between the brothers was still raw that Marion was wrongly suspected of being an accused of murder. Marion was a perfect match; maybe if we had reached over and smacked him at my dining table, I should have shouted at him: Don’t be blind. See what you have in this woman! See how she loves you. Propose to her! Marry her. Get her to discard her habit, remove her vows. It is clear her first vow is to God, and not set for ‘Three blind Mice’ when he can play Bach’s ‘Ode’. There is also Hema, the woman he calls his mother, who decided early on in her life ‘to avoid the sheep life at all costs’.

The same commitment to a higher goal is reflected in Shiva. Otherwise unconventional in his attitudes and actions, Shiva devoted his life to serving the least wanted and most marginalized, instead of pursuing formal education in medicine like his brother. He was the embodiment of the secular saint. These kinds of inspired and saintly figures gave the novel its unique moral compass.

The Cost of Forbidden Love

Faith is a highly personal matter and must be respected. Yet, one cannot help but wonder about the wisdom of aspects of it, for example celibacy which has led to many scandals that have befallen the high priest and celibates of morality and caused damage to the lives of many, many young girls around the world. ‘Birth, Copulation and Death’ are common denominators. Nothing is more natural, and anything that ascribes sin to Sex is obviously emotional, and inhibited especially about sex. Shiva, on the other hand, was the more detached, rational, practical and driving. Although still in his teens, he had more experience with sex and no qualms about sleeping with any woman.

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Take, for instance, Hema, the twins' adoptive mother, devoted wife and a source of many lives. She'd been kept busy from her first day. If the truth be known, she secretly relished the eliminations, the simplifications she made in her work, where the seconds ticked off, where a mother's life hung in the balance, or a baby in the womb, depended on a heroic rescue. In those moments she did not have existential doubts. Life became sharply focused, meaningful just where she felt she was on her feet of meaning. A mother, a wife, a daughter, was suddenly none of these things, boiled to a human being in grave danger.

Those were committed humanists who saw meaning in service. Or take Dr Ghosh, Hema's husband and the twins' adoptive father. Ghosh, a lecher who loved his drinks and women and yet turned into a devoted husband and father, was immensely appreciative of each day. Another day in prison, another of his frequent pronouncements when he settled his head on his pillow. Like Maurice in Tuesday's with Morrie, he says 'the uneventful day was a precious gift'. 'The key to happiness', Ghosh tells us, 'is to own your slippers, own who you are, own how you look, own your family, own the talents you have, and own the ones you don't. If you keep saying the slippers aren’t yours, then you will die searching, you will die bitter, always feeling you were promised more'. This indeed happened to Genet, Marie's great love and his source of misery and unhappiness; she 'died chasing greatness and never saw it each time it was in her hand, so she kept seeking it elsewhere, but never understood the work required to get it or keep it.'

The Perfection of Life and of Work

A common narrative in our modern age is the tension between work and life or work and the family. This is a real challenge in daily life that is directly addressed in this novel. Marion, as we saw earlier, challenges and advises the narrator. Geography brought him there, his association with a general who had been the saviour of many lives. But, sadly, he had to. He went on exile to Africa because of a suspicion that he was part of a conspiracy in a political/criminal act committed by Genet, the girl he always loved. Those years of exile were years of pain, memories of playing and singing in his mind. They contributed to a melancholic and haunting Ethiopian song, Tizita.

Tizita

Tizita is almost certainly the most beloved Ethiopian song. There is no English equivalent that captures the meaning of Tizita. Abraham Verghese translates it to mean 'memory tinged with regret', which is almost correct. But it is more than that. In its simplest form it means memory, or memory of one's love, or of a turbulent love affair, a longing for one's lover, even for his/ her anger and irritating behaviour. You sing it when you are happy and when you knew that for him to eat, we had to starve. One day, when my older brother and mother came with food, they heard the dreaded words, “No need to bring food anymore”. That’s how we knew my father was dead. And you know why we arrested my brother today? For no reason. He is a hardworking businessman. But he is a child of one of their old enemies. We are the first suspects. The old enemies and the new enemies have dealt us so extensively because such stories, especially those of fear of retribution, remain to this day an unfortunate facet of our lives and political fabric.

Even so, Marion's love and loyalty never wavered. Soon after Ghosh was released, he once overheard him and his wife contemplating taking the family somewhere else (Persia or Zambia), before another attempted coup. Marion was not amused: 'Were they joking? This was my country they were talking about, the land of my birth, its potential for violence and mayhem had been proven. But it was still home. How much worse would it be to be tortured in a land that wasn't your own?' He continues:

Call me unwanted, call my birth a disaster, call me a bastard child of a disgraced nun and a disappeared father, … but the loamy soil that nurtured Marion’s roses was my flesh. I said Ethyo-nya, like a native. Let those born in other lands speak of teee-ee-chop-eey-ya, as if it were a compound name like Sharm el Sheikh, or Dar es Salaam. The Entoto mountains disappearing in darkness framed my horizon; if I left, those mountains would sink back to the ground, shrouded into nothingness; the mountains needed me to gaze at their tree-filled slopes, just as I needed them to be certain I was alive. The canopoy of stars at night; that, too, was my birthright. A celestial gardener sowed meskel seeds so that when the rainy season ended, the meskel would bloom in its welcome. Even the Drowning Soil, the foul-smelling quick sand behind Missing, which had swallowed a horse, a man – a horse… a man – all of what else – I claimed that as well…All possibilities resided within me, and they required me to be here. If I left, I would be lost.

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you are sad, or when you are in love and out of love. You listen to it in the comfort of your sofa, but you are also as likely to wallow on the floor with the one you love. You sing it in the familiar surroundings of your native land, but especially when and if you are banished to exile. It is mostly melancholic but it can sometimes be fast. It is a very unusual song which speaks to the Ethiopian psyche and soul. It is in the end about remembrance of things past in all their manifestations.

It grows with and on you and stays with you for ever. And so it does with Marion, the Ethiopian/Indian. ‘After lunch, Shiva and I fall asleep, arms around each other, breath on each other’s face, heads touching. In that fugue state between wakefulness and dreaming, the song I hear is ... Tizita’, he says. It is the song he hears through all his years in Ethiopia, the one he carries with him whenever and wherever he goes, and the one he hears during his years of exile in America.

There are various versions of Tizita – for example, those of Bezawork Asfaw, Rahel Yohannes, Getachew Kassa, and Mahmoud Ahmed. As Verghese says, ‘every Ethiopian artist records a Tizita . They record it in Addis Ababa, but also in exile in Khartoum... and of course in Rome, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, and New York. “Tizita” is the heart’s anthem, the lament of the diaspora... ‘It is therefore not surprising that the first thing Marion carried in his bag upon leaving suddenly his mother, at Missing Hospital. ‘Born in Africa, living in exile in America, then returning to last to Africa, I am proof that geography is destiny. Destiny has coordinates of my birth, to the very same operating theatre where I was born.’

A Beautiful Novel with the Wrong Title

This is a sensitive, often elegiac book with a well-constructed and engaging plot and full of vivid characters. The title is taken from the Hippocratic Oath but remains a poor and unconvincing choice that fails to do justice to the underlying themes and to the story beautifully told in this book. Although he sometimes tells us about things he couldn’t possibly remember or know, Marion the narrator does a good job of describing the events and the personalities that shaped his life, and does so with respect and balance, without making them persons ‘neither of superlative goodness nor repellent wickedness’.

Minorities and Majorities

This is a novel which should reach a much wider audience than would otherwise be through an American or UK edition. It is of manifest interest to an audience in Ethiopia, where much of the action takes place. But it would be of equal appeal to the wider African audience or to minority communities within and outside Africa. It serves as a counterpoint to the conventional narrative on the relationship between minority groups and indigenous majorities, and speaks of the rich and interwoven relationships between them. More importantly, it is a moving eulogy and testament that love of country and love of a woman can transcend ethnicity and cultural barriers. It is an alternative and uplifting antidote to the real or imagined grievances about the parochialism of Asians in Eastern Africa and the racist policies that it ostensibly triggered or justified in Amin’s Uganda.

The Writer as a Moralist

Early on in the book, Marion shares with us in a deeply moving and philosophical way his reflections on the flow and flood of life, more precisely his life, the piercing losses that shaped the very beginnings and last phase of his life, and the nostalgia, sentimentalism and wisdom that elusive memory bestows on the past. We live and act in the present, without the benefit of hindsight on the past. We live and act in the present, without the benefit of hindsight on the past. We live and act in the present, without the benefit of hindsight on the past. We live and act in the present, without the benefit of hindsight on the past.

Notes

2. Amharic for ‘foreigner’.