

## Gripped by Revolution

If there is a momentous period in the post-war history of Ethiopia, it is undoubtedly the 1960s and 1970s, the latter being the alter ego of the former. The foundational significance of those years is seen in the paradigmatic shift the country underwent after and because of the revolution. Ethiopia would never be the same again. A chain of events swept away the monarchy, destroyed its material and ideological foundations, and restructured the country on a different political-economy.

Equally fascinating as the consequences of the revolution is the story of its origins and originators. It requires a leap of thinking to comprehend how a country with its entrenched conservatism ended up producing what arguably was one of the Third World's most radical revolutions and revolutionaries. The explanation lies not just in the depth of national predicament but also in the radicalization of both diagnosis and prescriptions. What followed was a hardening of vision and eventually of strategy. Such evolution, however, was not total and there were strong, if few, dissenting voices, including Getachew Maru, whose inspirational story is immortalized in the book – *Tower in the Sky* – by his lover and protégé, Hiwot Teffera.

### The Education of Hiwot

Hiwot Teffera was the same as her generation but also different. Most were united by a collective embrace of Marxian ideology and the idea of revolution but were divided by social structure, circumstance and the trajectory of their political lives. Hiwot was born and bred in the polyglot city of Harar, a formation shaped by her middle class upbringing and a period of immersion in Western, especially French, culture. Her political being, nevertheless, was organized around a sense of nationalism, a sentiment which Harar fostered despite being a city mediating between its simultaneously frontier and national cultures. In fact, a characteristic widely shared among many people of Ethiopia's urban east has been the ease (or even effortlessness) with which they navigated Ethiopia's cultural terrain and its landscape of modernity.

Before long, though, this liberal upbringing and her idea of belonging would be questioned, reinvented in part or even rejected altogether. Conformity would give way to a desire to re-imagine and reinvent self, its place in society, and its relations with politics. Such a liberal-to-radical transformation – the process of becoming a revolutionary – is more generational than personal, a norm rather than an exception affecting the youth of the period. An idea was becoming a movement.

### Introducing *Tower in the Sky*

The last few years have seen the publication of scores of books on Ethiopia's revolutionary period. They have come in the shape of fictionalized accounts of true stories, memoirs, and scholarly works. Hiwot's book, part of

## Love and Politics in the Time of Revolution

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### Tower in the Sky

by Hiwot Teffera

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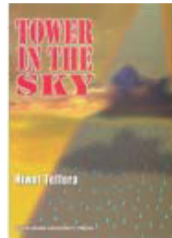
an emerging genre of autobiographical writing, is the latest contribution to the 'literature of revolution.'

'*Tower in the Sky*' is a first-person chronicle of Hiwot's revolutionary experience and the experiences of her compatriots between the dying days of the monarchy (late 1960s – early 1970s) and the high years of the revolution (late 1970s – early 1980s). The book is written with verve and the authority of a participant and tells the story in a language and style that are both lucid and evocative. Offering a moving and gripping story of love and revolution, of place and time, the glories and agonies of a period, the author moves nimbly between narrative and reflection, interspersing both with short, poignant vignettes.

The narrative is a chronicle of Hiwot's journey from a life in Harar to a spell at the Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) to a period when she gave herself to the revolution, in all its promises and betrayals, before the journey 'ends' in incarceration. The end, nonetheless, is not a completion but the beginning of a chapter in life, after release from incarceration, which aims at a closure through reflection, a counting and an accounting of the revolutionary experience and one's place in it.

If there are two organizing ideas of the book, one then should be 'love in time of revolution', and the other 'the making of a revolutionary', both however telling the story of the Ethiopian revolution through a record of one woman's revolutionary journey and that of her compatriots. The many vignettes in the book enrich the narrative and ease the flow of the story.

On the one hand, therefore, Hiwot's *Tower in the Sky* is an account of a love affair. If a shared space, the university, engendered the relationship, an idea, the quest for social justice, shaped and sustained it through the tumultuous years of revolution and the cycle of betrayal and destruction. Such a love was more ethereal than carnal, a yearning for a person for the ideas he embodied: his humanity, his youthful idealism, and his will to fight. There is no better declaration of this than her confession: 'Getachew was the shaman who resuscitated my lethargic soul and solved my existential riddle' (p. 104).



Yet, to define or view this love through the prism of revolution is to miss the full spectrum of their relationship or the richness of their existence. One of the merits of Hiwot's book (and a few other works on the revolution, like Konjit Berhan's *Merkogna*,<sup>1</sup> also written by a woman) is the humanization of often insipid accounts of discourse and struggle, their evocative description of man's complex existences, of their exploration of life which is much deeper and more exciting than revolution. Hence, the beauty and memorability of accounts of friendships or passion for life and its many gifts, not to mention those surreptitious visits to the campus 'kissing pool' or the occasional jokes and innuendoes.

Nevertheless, revolution is the force that gives meaning to the characters' existence, the thread that ties the entire narrative architecture. Thus, there is no disentangling of love for the person from the love of life and revolution, for all were one and the same. This unity is encapsulated in Hiwot's reinvention as a revolutionary, a development which was as much an outgrowth of her association with Getachew as it was a consequence of her sharpening understanding of the injustices of the Ethiopian system. Getachew, a lover and mentor, was the critical link in this evolution.

In *Tower in the Sky*, Hiwot narrates her change from being a liberal with a craving for things and ideas Western, especially French, to a radical against anything Western, critical, even disdainful, of its moral decadence and the inequity of its system. A factor in her transformation was an encounter with Marxism, which became the ideological framework (her 'religion, her god') with which she saw and interpreted the world, often rigidly (as a system of exploiters vs the exploited). However, this binary opposition would prove to be more constraining, even obfuscating, incapable of explaining the complexity and fluidity of social reality, especially Ethiopian. Her lens on the world, the organizer of her social-political life, would become a cause for her disillusionment, eventually of her dissociation with politics.

Before the final parting of ways, however, there was a long, meaningful but torturous phase of Hiwot's life as a member of the clandestine opposition (first of Abyot and then of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, EPRP) and her everyday encounters with the regime and its apparatus of repression.

Apart from the joy and excitement of being part of a great cause, there was always an awareness, at times subliminal, of the tension and the specter of danger in every movement and action, whether this was within the party or outside of it. Two of the most memorable accounts of the book capture this explosive mix: that of the author's assignments as a courier of her party which involved traveling in disguises to avoid capture and that of the emotional turmoil she lived through following a rupture within the EPRP and the subsequent struggle to coexist with both, her party and her lover-mentor.

The agony of 'keeping' both that she loved dearly, the party as an 'infallible' guardian of the revolution and Getachew as the true embodiment of its original spirit, represents Hiwot's ordeal, one paralleled in later years, under incarceration, by her decision to stick by another political rebel, Mekonnen Bayisa. The major difference between the two was that there was now a falling-out with the crowd, instead of the earlier need to accommodate. The (morale) story of this painful experience nevertheless was the strength of the author's character: her humanity, her deep sense of loyalty as well as her courage to go against the current. At the same time, the trauma of her existence ties to the larger story she tells, her courageous, and hence enduring, contribution to the memory of the revolutionary experience: the revelation of an untold story (of Getachew, his ideas, and his struggles).

### The Import

The publication of *Tower in the Sky* and similar works by participants, within and outside of the opposition, has expanded our archive of knowledge on the revolution and the revolutionaries. The benefits to this 'literature of revolution' are evident in two ways: in terms of an increase in information and understanding of the period but also in the emergence of multiple, at times oppositional, accounts of the revolution. The more significant development, which is capable of both clarifying and obfuscating, is the appearance of a contestation of memories and historiographies of the revolutionary experience. What is being enhanced and uncovered but also contested in the process is knowledge of the (infrastructure of) revolution as a whole.

Broadly speaking, *Tower in the Sky* is a work of affirmation with a hint of revisionism (as far as this means a telling of one's experience but also a reevaluation of it with a hindsight bias). It illuminates understanding of the period but also interrogates assumptions about the organization, leadership and objectives of revolution. In doing so, the book also becomes a work of excavation and rehabilitation. It retells the untold (or mutilated) story of Getachew and his group. The objective is to recapture their place in the narrative of the revolution and counter their elision or erasure in the established historiography as heretical or antithetical.

The book reinforces this objective by organizing the story around Getachew, a character central to the telling of other, often suppressed, accounts of the revolution and the revolutionary leadership. One can argue, at the risk of simplification, that a history of the Ethiopian revolution would not be complete or objective in the absence of stories about Getachew and the Abyot group, Berhane-Mesqel Redda and the 'Anja', and many others. A man so young yet so old (only 27 when he was killed), Getachew was like many of his compatriots but unlike many of them at the same time, especially his courage to differ with the party leadership at a time when to fall in line was the surest way to survive. One only needs to follow the chronicle of his life and his views on issues of vital importance to the revolution and his role in its leadership and organization.

More specifically, *Tower in the Sky* is significant for what it says and it doesn't. Both are equally revealing. Hiwot's narrative, for instance, offers poignant descriptions of her social class and a rich cartography of life and revolution through vivid portraits of place and the urban crowd. Vignettes about such storied places as Sidist Kilo, Jolly Bar, Piazza, Merkato, and Carcere inform as much about the state of urbanism in the city as about the revolution, both of which are linked although unexplored. Conversely, *Tower in the Sky* offers little or no exploration of issues of the countryside, gender, class, ethnicity, religion and their link to the revolutionary experience. Let me highlight the methodological and historiographical implications of this otherwise innocent inclusion-omission.

The first is the need for a social history of the Ethiopian revolution, which is largely missing. Such a methodological approach helps transcend the conventional, at times sterile, political, even politicized, analysis of the revolutionary experience and offers entry into many un- or little explored aspects and questions of the period. This includes how networks were built; friendships formed; people politicized, radicalized, organized and mobilized; and how these political formations were shaped by class, education, geography, ethnicity and religion; not to mention the link between art and literature and revolution, the former also serving as

a *crucible for* and a *reflection of* the latter. The need for a deeper 'archaeology of Ethiopian knowledge' notwithstanding, a social history of revolution enables investigation of the social production of the Ethiopian intelligentsia (including the 'ghettoized' and *alienating* nature of that constitution) and the genealogy of their radicalization or of the failure to develop vernacular or indigenized ideas of change or the wholesale, even uncritical, embrace, instead, of a foreign, albeit seductive, ideology.

Secondly, a gendered perspective on the Ethiopian revolution is sorely belated but still indispensable to complete the story of this most phenomenal of Ethiopia's modernist experience but also to rectify their historiographical 'erasure' or elision. The story of the Ethiopian woman, in revolution or beyond, is a voice that is often silenced or a role ignored or only peripherally recognized. Any account that renders women, 'half the sky', invisible and without a voice reflects a deeper crisis in a nation's character, not just in the landscape of its historical memory and scholarship. *Tower in the Sky*, like *Merkogna*, represents a female's, but not a gendered, perception of the revolutionary experience. The gendering of that perception and the re-entry of women back into the story of the revolution requires a fundamental shift in our understanding of social experience, past or present, and the way we write about it.

The final point is foreshadowed by the author's contemporary condition of existence, a diaspora mediating two cultures, living transnationally, writing from outside, but often suspended between being not here and not there. There is no disentangling this state of being, her life after prison, from that of her revolutionary generation who were based and shaped in the West before they headed home. It would be interesting to explore the implication of this diasporic experience on their (often fractured) notion of belonging, their sense of authenticity, their ideas of change and visions of the future. One can, however, stress, at the minimum, the importance of exploring the link, or even the dialogic traffic that animates and informs, between the Ethiopian diaspora, their political activism, and the global social movements of the 1960s.

## By Way of Conclusion

*Tower in the Sky* is a refreshing account of the Ethiopian revolution but this by itself does not fully explain why we should read it or remember a period which it depicts was incomparably brutal. The most obvious explanation would be because the unimaginable happened and was even recorded to the minutest of details of plans, orders, and actions. Is this architecture of annihilation just a scar from the past, an aberration from our ordinary world, or something hidden frozen, but potentially repeatable, in the mainstream of our civilization? Any serious call for 'never again' requires the need, even urgency, to understand the infrastructure of evil and its enabling ideology but also the circumstances of the victims, those 'who had to make choice-less choices between the impossible and the horrific', including the indifference of many to the senseless atrocities. Knowing the past and saving its memory in all its diversity is thus critical to reinventing a future or building a country at peace with itself and with the world. But how is a past, which is never really past, saved and remembered?

One can discern two trends. The first is to save the past as history irrelevant to the present while asserting the sole right over its interpretation. This strategy seeks to frame the past, repair it, empty the agency within it, turn it into a relic, and preserve it, like an artifact (in a museum). In the second, the past is preserved as a fragment or fragments scattered everywhere, not as a system or a consistent narrative. The crucial question is how and what kind of history to tell, which of the past to remember: one that subsumes difference under a single dominant 'history of the generation', 'of the revolution', or 'of the movement', or one that reduces such an overarching experience into the experiences of different, often warring, groups?

*Tower in the Sky* seems to suggest two possibilities. On the one hand, its exploration of Getachew and his group represents a promise that is crucial to any objective accounting of the Ethiopian revolutionary experience, which is the excavation of as many and different narratives of the revolution as possible. A major historiographical question about the revolution (wherein lies the significance of works like *Tower*

*in the Sky*) is not just the *veracity* of the stories but also the *incompleteness* of those stories. What is needed therefore is a *balance* of stories, the ability to tell other accounts, tolerate them, and learn from them. Such a democratization of the historiography and memory of revolution is liberating and empowering.

At the same time, however, the notion of multiplicity of narratives tends to simplify a complex period and fragment a movement unified by a common vision for change and the collective experience of struggle and sacrifice. One option to save such a past from being a caricature and make it relevant to the present is to de-compartmentalize discussion of the period and construct a coherent narrative of the experience. The story should be consistent but not necessarily uniform, for homogeneity can engender a hegemony of narrative.

On the other hand, the quest for liberation and empowerment fails if a transition is not made in our narrative of the revolution from remembrance to reflection to interpretation. The last ones are lacking in most recent accounts of the revolution. Partly, this is rooted in the nature of those accounts, which are predominantly autobiographical. A deeper explanation might probably be found in the recentness of the events and the brutal, often tragic, nature of their conclusion. The deep sense of loss (over the killing of comrades and the incompleteness of the revolution) has left a scar on survivors and affects their capacity to reconcile with the past, leaving them in a state of self-imposed silence or censorship.

It is therefore courageous and commendable of Hiwot (and her compatriots) to break the silence and share their experience. Such is the joy and pain of their pen. The act of writing however becomes enduring and impactful when it leads to reflection and examination (of which *Tower in the Sky* is a cautious beginning) of what happened, including what went wrong. After all, a life unexamined is a life not meaningfully lived, if not worth living, as Socrates asserted.

## Note

1. Konjit Berhan, 2002 EC, *Merkogna*, Addis Ababa.

