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Comedy and Social Purpose:
Two Plays of Menghistu Lemma

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C O N T E N T S:

Pages

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION i

CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO ETHIOPIAN DRAMA. . . 1

CHAPTER TWO

THE METHOD OF MENGHISTU LEMMA'S COMEDY

1. Plot Design 13

2. Characterization 25

3. Language 37

CHAPTER THREE

SATIRE AND SOCIAL CRITICISM 47

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION 73

BIBLIOGRAPHY 78

APPENDIX: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR 80

A B S T R A C T

This study is a thematic and stylistic analysis of two plays by the Ethiopian playwright, Menghistu Lemma: namely, Marriage by Abduction and Marriage of Unequals. It attempts to fulfil three important functions.

Firstly, before this study no substantial discussion of Menghistu Lemma's work existed. Certain writers had touched on the themes of his plays in the course of providing a survey of Ethiopian Literature, and an undergraduate thesis exists which contains a brief description in Amharic of the writing style of all his works, including his poetry. This study, however, differs from these attempts in objective, depth and scope.

Secondly, there was previously no substantial survey of the development of modern Ethiopian drama. It is obvious that such a survey is necessary, not only in order to place Menghistu Lemma and his dramatic works in context, but also to facilitate the study of Ethiopian drama in general. Chapter One in this study goes some way towards providing such a survey.

Thirdly, Ethiopian literature has in general been afforded scant attention by critics of African literature. Some writers have attributed this fact to difficulties of language and the lack of translations. An encouraging new development is that some novelists and playwrights have started to write or translate their works into English; one of them is Menghistu Lemma.

However, it is the opinion of this researcher that the translation of works of Ethiopian literature into English is not enough unless it is accompanied by a parallel development of criticism, without which a complete grasp of the works is not possible. It is hoped that this study will help a non-Ethiopian reader to see these two plays in the context of the social, economic and political history of feudal Ethiopia.

The study of the literary worth and social relevance of these two plays suggests that they are vivid and authentic documents of their period, and that future generations will

read them with interest. Menghistu Lemma himself emerges as a gifted satirist and as a writer of sound dramatic technique and a subtle and unique brand of rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

Feudal Ethiopia, like any other decadent society, was riddled with absurd norms and mores. This society was long characterized by a degeneration of its value systems. This degeneration in cultural values stirred some of the contemporary writers, while many were stolid and therefore placidly accepted the order of things as they were. But those who were indignant at the miscarriages of feudal justice rose and involved themselves in producing satiric literature. The subjugation of the overwhelming majority to all kinds of indignities offered them the content for their works. One of these defenders of society is, of course, the poet-playwright, Menghistu Lemma.

Menghistu Lemma was born in June 1928, and was brought up in Harar, where he received his Church and modern primary education, the former of which included works in Tama (religious music) and Qene (classical poetry). He then came to Addis Ababa in order to pursue his secondary education at Haile Selassie I Secondary School, Kotebe.

After completing his studies at home, he went abroad to England, where he studied sociology for three years at the Regent Polytechnic and the London School of Economics. He then came back to Ethiopia and worked in the Civil Aviation Department for some time. Later he was appointed First Secretary to the Ethiopian Embassy in India. He has also worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture and Sports before he joined Addis Ababa University.

Menghistu's writings include Yegetem Gubae, a volume of collected poems in which his refined talent for versification is best demonstrated. He has also written Yabatoch Chewata, a volume of traditional Amharic stories.

Apart from these, Menghistu has written five original plays and three adaptations from J.B. Priestley, Anton Chekhov and Tewfik Al-Hakim. But his best-known plays are the two

comedies which came out in 1962 and 1963: Marriage by Abduction and Marriage of Unequals. Both of these plays have been translated into English, the first by the author and an American, and the second by himself.

Since the emergence of Menghistu Lemma as a dramatist, the social functions of Ethiopian modern drama have become a means of social criticism. Following in his footsteps, later dramatists have written plays that have registered each event, and have expressed every essential action of life.

The reason for the existence of such drama matches a need. First, the Ethiopian, like any other civilized being, has a need for entertainment. Therefore, contemporary drama in its new form should reply to this need; that is, it should recreate the old ways of leisure in agreement with the new needs and values of a literate society.

Secondly, theatrical performances must inspire collective action by the masses to carry these actions into real life.

Thirdly, the prime concern of Ethiopian drama must be to enrol the working class in the struggle for its emancipation. This class must be presented with themes that correspond to its preoccupations.

The objective that present-day drama should set itself is to produce thought, popular in content, from which the masses can draw lessons. Plays with adequate content, related to the times and moreover dramatic, should be the preoccupation of an Ethiopian drama which aims at catering for the needs and demands of our time.

Fourthly, a strong mobilization of the working people, through the continuing literacy campaign whose success will be assured by in part breaking down the traditional family structures, and by emancipating the people from the weight of custom, can be achieved through drama.

Fifthly, it is time that the masses used drama, the outstanding art form, to do away with traditions which constitute an impediment to socio-economic transformation.

Drama is said to be popular when it serves the purpose of a people. The tendency to cater for a limited group of privileged persons must be discouraged, because drama is not necessarily a nourishment for the economically well-off, but can be a true popular drama.

A popular theatre performs, for a popular audience, plays written for the people and which tell the people about themselves. Our momentous revolution and the struggle of the masses for their emancipation will undoubtedly provide fresh themes for modern Ethiopian drama. This will come true if the contents of the plays accord with the expectations of the people.

Modern Ethiopian drama must find an appropriate medium for dramatic expression. This can be so, the researcher feels, when the new socialist man is developed and enriched: in the end, it is he who can help modern Ethiopian drama to flourish.

For a country that has adopted Socialism as its means of progress, the task that satire may accomplish is potentially tremendous. In a revolutionary period, mistakes are committed both by progressives unintentionally and by veritable reactionaries. Both have to be tackled in due time; the former before they upset the revolutionary process and the latter before they revert the revolutionary gains to former conditions.

The researcher's intention, therefore, is to demonstrate the way in which Menghistu Lemma has utilized satire to defend the oppressed people. Satire fulfils a valuable function by dramatizing the objectionable qualities and practices of the socialist man that we aspire to be. Constructive criticism of erroneous practice and self-criticism are precepts of a socialist society. It is believed that satire is an effective

medium for this purpose to do justice to the follies and vices of man and society. Therefore, the cardinal purpose of this study is to show that the test for satire is its success in the area of criticism of man and society.

Moreover, this researcher believes that prospective writers should use the art of satire in order to rectify the ills of our society. This art form is medicinal because its instruments are wit, humour and irony, weapons which are particularly effective in the hands of a dramatist such as Menghistu Lerma.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO ETHIOPIAN DRAMA

The history and development of Ethiopian drama in general goes very far back in time. But modern Ethiopian drama is a recent phenomenon, when contrasted with the other literary genres. Its emergence and the introduction of the modern school system coincide. The terms modern drama and the modern school system refer, respectively, to drama written after the Western style and a school system structured on the Western model. With regard to this fact, Solomon Deressa, a renowned poet, asserts that "The first plays were put on at the Menelik Second School at the turn of the century."¹

However, another playwright-actor, Tesfaye Gessesse, declares, "ትያትር ገንበሀገራችን ጋራ ባሕል ወይም ልማድ የለውም፡፡ ከነሱም አንዱን ከወጧ ሀገር የተወረሰ ነው፡፡"² The justification he gives is that the term "theatron" is not Ethiopian in origin, though it is traceable in Geez literature. As a matter of fact, it is a Greek term. "አንዳንድ የቋንቋ አዋቂዎች በገዕዝ ከገሪስ የተወረሰ ቲያትርን የግብረ ቃል አለ ይላሉ፡፡ ነገር ገን አምብዛም ያልታወቀ ነው፡፡"³ He further states that Geez is believed to have been spoken in the Aksumite court.

¹"The Arts in Ethiopia: A Matter of Plays", Addis Reporter I (May, 1969), p. 14.

²"A Short Study of Ethiopian Theatre", Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Pt. II (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Haile Selassie I University, June, 1970), p. 302.

Theatre does not have a long-lived history in Ethiopia. Even the term itself is borrowed from another language [trans. of text and title by researcher].

³Ibid.

Some language academicians assert that the term "theatron" was borrowed by the Geez language. However, it is not very much observed [trans. by researcher].

Nevertheless, Tesfaye is sceptical about his hypothesis that Greek theatre tradition was adopted by the Aksumites, because of the absence of evidence with regard to the remains of an amphitheatre in or around Aksum, similar to the Greek ones.

But since the term "theatron" is Greek, and since Geez is found to have it in its vocabulary, it is logical to argue that the Aksumites surely borrowed the art of the theatre from the Greeks, even if there are no archeological findings to testify to the existence of an amphitheatre during the heyday of the Aksumite empire. Moreover, no attempt has been made to study this state of affairs with special emphasis on dramatic performances. Therefore, it would be too hasty a generalization to conclude in the negative, when it is still possible to do further research.

Still, it is possible to provide a cogent justification for the fact that the Greeks were known to have traded with the Ethiopians in ancient times. On top of that, historical evidence indicates that Greek merchants used to come to trade centres such as Adulis. Tsegaye Gebre Medhin maintains the view, "It is quite probable that Axum and, even more likely, Adulis had a reasonably well-developed theatre which they [the Ethiopians] borrowed from the Greeks."⁴

Moreover, it is reasonable to think that there was formerly dramatic literary culture in our country. When we go back to its inception and development in Europe, we discover that it started in churchyards and later moved out to the nearby areas. "ከገንዘብ . . . የመጀመሪያቸው ትምህርቶች ያህል የነበሩት በየቤተ ክርስቲያን ዙፋን ውስጥ ነበር፡፡"⁵ Dramatic

⁴ Quoted by Solomon Deressa, p.17.

⁵ Kebede Gessesse, "The Historical Development of Ethiopian Theatre" (Addis Ababa: H.S.I.U., May, 1972), p.5. (Mimeographed).

The English showed their first performances in churchyards or surrounding areas [trans. of text and title by researcher].

history records that, in all Christian Europe, it was customary to perform miracle plays. Christianity is a culture imported into Ethiopia. When it was imported it must have come with all that helped its growth, notably with drama. Thus it is rational to conclude that drama is an old profession in this country, though it may not have been well developed.

The argument that drama has no longstanding historical background can be dismissed. One may contend that there was no drama proper in those days as we know it today. But as one comes closer in time, one notices that there have been other forms of drama that used to be performed by minstrels on various occasions. Among those theatrical activities performed by minstrels were dance drama and praise songs, accompanied by the one-stringed musical instrument, the "masinko", and the traditional flute. We can also recall the traditional battle-cry, or what is called "Fukera", which requires a real dramatic performance.

This traditional art, however, has not evolved to any great extent. The doldrums in stagecraft may have been caused by "... long periods of war beginning with religious wars of the 16th century through the age of the princes which lasted until the middle of the 19th century, during which there was no fixed capital city".⁶ That being the excuse for the lack of development in traditional drama, we are forced to jump abruptly on to an examination of modern drama.

When we come to modern drama, the first person we encounter is Bejirond Tekle Hawariat Tekle Mariam, who wrote Comedy of Animals. Kebede Gessesse in his study of the

⁶"Amharic Drama", Ethiopia Today: The Arts (1973), p.33.

Ethiopian Theatre confirms that "በኢትዮጵያ የመጀመሪያው ያማርኛ ጎያትር ፋብላ ወይም የአገሳሳት ጠዋታ በጣል ርዕሰ ከፊታውራሪ ተከለሰዋሪያት ተዘጋጅቶ የቀረበ ጽሑፍ ነው።"⁷ Its author, a foreign-educated agriculturalist by training, wrote it with the aim of showing the techniques of writing drama, as he states in the introduction. But his prime objective was to shock the corrupt government functionaries with his bitter criticism. Therefore, it is right to say that Bejirond Tekle Hawariat is indeed the first modern social critic in Ethiopia.

The method of the play is precisely the same as that of La Fontaine's Fables, and the characters are animals, as is usual in a fable. Being a pungent satire on contemporary Ethiopia, the play was banned by Queen Zawditu.

That which arouses laughter is, of course, human. Even if Tekle Hawariat used animals as characters, because of the human associations evoked, they can make us laugh. The author realized this, and used the animal fable as a device to criticize the state apparatus and particularly the ministers. He found the behaviour of animals an easy method by which to ridicule the weaknesses and follies of his contemporaries. He used goats, sheep, cows and various other animals, just like La Fontaine, as symbols for human types human follies.

This pungent satiric fable is truly critical, pointedly directed at the contemporary officials and, of course, very entertaining. The purpose is no doubt double-edged: first to expose the vices of corrupt civil servants and, second, to make moralizing more palatable.

⁷"The Historical Development of Ethiopian Theatre", p. 18.

The first Amharic play in Ethiopia was Fabula or the Comedy of Animals which was written by Fitawrari Tekle Hawariat [trans. by researcher].

However, it sometimes gives the impression that Tekle Hawariat is too strict, and therefore unkind to the butt of his satire. The fox, for example, is a veritable rascal, but the animal pleases more by performing the vices and hypocrisies of the authorities than by defending their virtues.

The Bejirond's Comedy of Animals expresses real social criticism, mockery and poignant criticism, which gained him spite and hatred and eventually a severe warning both from the Queen and his superiors. But, successfully enough, in his most trenchant satire he achieved a deep observation of debasement by showing the heart-curdling struggle between ministers and the palace attendants to amass wealth and win favour from the prospective king Lij Iyasu; thus undermining their responsibilities. They appeared to act only from instinct, and this was what the first satirist attacked mercilessly.

This social criticism pinched the aristocrats painfully and made them react resolutely, until they succeeded in having the play banned by the Queen. They presented the case in such a way that the Bejirond appeared to reprove the Queen, which of course made her lose her temper and therefore reprimand him bitterly for his "uncouthness"; and then issued a proclamation banning the play. As a result, theatrical performances were forbidden until the ascension of Haile Selassie I to the throne in 1930.

After Haile Selassie was crowned King of Ethiopia, there emerged a new era of briskness and blossoming of Amharic drama. This period, which ensued immediately after 1930, is best exemplified by the works of Yoftahe Negussie and Melaku Begosew, the two foremost pioneers in Ethiopian drama. Most literary veterans identify Yoftahe as the father of Amharic drama.

Menghistu Lemma, in his Introduction to Modern Ethiopian Literature, points out,

In modern drama the pioneers came much later. Melaku Begosew and Yoftahe, who used the Amharic medium, incorporated song and dance in their dramas. . . . They were the most popular playwrights of the years before the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia.⁸

These two playwrights toured from school to school in order to agitate and help students put on plays. Meanwhile, Yoftahe and Melaku also wrote plays themselves to set an example to students and other interested groups.

During the pre-Fascist period, the two playwrights performed several of their plays in collaboration with the students they trained, under the auspices of BilatenGeta Sahle Tsedalu, an important figure in the Ministry of Education at that time. Tesfaye Gessesse, in his study, indicates

"በኢትዮጵያ ትምህርት የተሻሻለው ዘመናዊ ጥበባዊ ስራ በተጀመረ በኋላ ነው፡፡ የዓገጣዊ ዎ ጌላክ ጥበባዊ ስራ በ1900 ዓ.ም. ተከፈተ፡፡ . . . በ1917 ዓ.ም. የተፈሪ ወሱንን ጥበባዊ ስራ በከፈተ በተጣሪዎች አዳዲስ ጥራዊ ስራ ትምህርት ሁለት በታሪክ፡፡"⁹

Among those plays performed at Menelik Second School, the Comedy of Animals was the first. As it was the first play, it is believed to have imparted the art of playwriting to these pioneer playwrights.

⁸"Introduction of Modern Ethiopian Literature", A Paper Presented for the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference (Stockholm, February, 1967), pp. 6-7.

⁹"A Short Study of the Ethiopian Theatre", p. 305.

In Ethiopia, performing plays was started after the introduction of the modern school system. When Menelik Second and Teferi Mekonnen Schools were opened in 1900 and 1917 E.C. respectively, students were capable of producing their plays in two places [trans. by researcher].

Besides these prominent figures in the history of Ethiopian drama, Captain Malbandian wrote and staged plays. This man, basically a master musician, presented a play known as The Adventures of Gebre Mariam, the Conderay. What played a significant role in the dramatic break-through in our country was the initiative taken by individuals in unco-ordinated fashion. Captain Malbandian is a typical example.

However, when one outlines the history and development of drama, one cannot overlook the emergence of the National Patriotic Association, better known as the "Hager Fekir Theatre". Its very inception is a major turning-point in the history of modern Ethiopian drama. Drama had been characterized by spontaneity and individual effort, but institutionalized effort was lacking until the foundation of this theatre. The lack of government initiative was not without reason. First of all, the use of drama as a source of entertainment, an instrument of instruction and a political weapon was not previously known in the country. Secondly, Ethiopia was always at war with invaders and had to protect its territorial integrity and national sovereignty. This view is supported by the modern director-playwright, Tesfaye Gessesse, thus:

Because Ethiopia was always fighting [the theatre had not developed], there had never been a long enough period of peace. And the Ethiopian emperors were always moving from one part of the country to another either to quell rebellion or to defend the frontiers. Do not¹⁰ forget, Addis Ababa is not even a century old.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the Hager Fekir Theatre brought about a change of attitude in the Ethiopian government regarding the use of drama. This theatre therefore played a substantial role in arousing national and patriotic feelings in the non-belligerent but peace-loving

¹⁰Quoted by Solomon Deressa, p. 17.

Ethiopians on the eve of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. It also accomplished a great deal in the training and development of unforgettable artistes.

Moreover, since Independence, this Association has contributed a great deal in uniting the Ethiopian people and assisting national development. Not only has it helped in assisting national integrity, sovereignty and unity, but it has also played a part in keeping up the cultural legacies of the various ethnic groups of the country. The Hager Fekir is, therefore, best known for its peculiarly rich popular theatre, and its displays of folk dance of the various cultural groups of Ethiopia.

When we study individual plays, produced and staged in this theatre, we discover that most of them are not plays in the strict sense of the term. Scenarios used to be given to actors to add their own touches here and there. These actors with their scripts were accompanied by the lyre and the "masinko", with the aim of setting the mood of the play.

As we delve further into dramatic history, we find another development. This is the emergence of the Addis Ababa City Hall, which started to put on plays towards the close of the 1940's. The contribution made by the Hager Fekir Theatre was so significant that it necessitated the establishment of the City Hall Theatre. Tesfay Gessesse records,

የአዲስ አበባ ጥዘጋጃ ቤት በ1942 ዓ.ም. ለዘመን መለወጫ
በዓል በአዲስ አበባ የግንኙነት የልዩ ልዩ ነገሮችና ዜጎች
የሃገር ባሕል ጠቀታ ውድድር አዘጋጅ፡፡ ይህም በአሁኑ ጊዜ
አጅገ ተወዳጅ ሆኖ መዘቃው ዓመቱን በሙሉ መደበኛ ሆኖ የግንኙነት
ገኘው የአገልግሎት የመዘቃ በዓል መጀመሪያ ነው፡፡¹¹

¹¹"A Short Study of the Ethiopian Theatre", p. 306.
The City Hall Theatre organized, for the first time in dramatic history, a folk-dance competition between the various nationalities and ethnic groups in 1942 E.C. This competition ushered in a new tradition of the "Inkutatash" music festival which used to be held every New Year's Eve [trans. by researcher].

To carry out this and other tasks, the Municipality of Addis Ababa established a theatrical committee which chose plays for performances on Sunday afternoons in a hall that seated about 400 people at a time. The initiative to establish the City Hall Theatrical Company was taken by Yoftahe Negussie and his coterie. The opening of this hall ushered in a new theatrical "boom", which accorded interested people the chance to write and present plays. Among these enthusiasts who put on their plays were Bitwoded Makonnen Endalkachew, the Prime Minister, Woizero Senedu Gebru and Woizero Romanework Kasahun.

Next to this group came another person. A prolific literary figure, Girmachew Teklehawariat, the son of the first comic writer, took up playwriting with Theodore, a historical play based on the history of the King of Ethiopia. This 19th-century warrior king of Ethiopia is magnificently depicted with all his unflinching efforts to unite and modernize his country. As a matter of fact, among all the plays written in Amharic towards the end of the 1940's, Theodore has succeeded in becoming a classic in Ethiopian drama. This same play has been translated into English by Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, a renowned contemporary playwright.

At about the same time, yet another prolific playwright from the upper echelon appeared with several of his plays. This is a writer whom we can call the Marlowe of Ethiopia, from whose pen came a play similar in plot construction to Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. He is Kebede Michael. This man is not only a playwright but also a famous versifier and translator. To mention but a few of his works, we can note Appointment with Destiny, Ato Belayneh, Hannibal and his translation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Ato Kebede is believed by many to have set an example to and made a great impact on the younger writers who followed him.

Following the emergence of the City Hall Theatre came

the leading playhouse in 1948 E.C., the National Theatre, then known as Haile Selassie First Theatre. When compared with the other theatres, this is a glamorous building designed after Western playhouses, with the intention of using it not only for the presentation of plays but also for film shows and other occasional entertainments. Its establishment gave a clarion call to veteran playwrights as well as to the novices of the time.

The call did not fall on deaf ears; many responded readily. However, there occurred a shift of perspective from moralistic, religious or historical plays to social criticism. This was a major change in the direction and development of Ethiopian drama, because what had been didactic gave way to what was realistic. This was in the Sixties. The theatre began to focus on contemporary issues by way of mirroring the conditions which prevailed then. This was difficult for those used to writing plays that soothed the bitter feelings of the oppressed masses. Therefore, a new generation of writers emerged with great zeal and heightened enthusiasm to depict reality; thereby bringing about the beginning of the transformation of society.

One of these leading social critics is Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, who came to the fore with his vitriolic pen to lay bare the archaic and therefore decadent feudal practices. He is an exceedingly prolific writer who has produced a good number of his own plays. Not only has he written plays of his own, but also he has translated some works of Shakespeare and Molière with a view to introducing the European literary heritage to his fellow Ethiopians. Though the produce of his own pen weighs heavily, the number of his translations is substantial; they have surely helped his fellow citizens to enjoy the Western literary treasures of the past and have eventually widened the scope of their literary knowledge. Apart from his endeavour to expose Ethiopian theatre-goers to Western thought and

stage-craft, Tsegaye opened up a new opportunity for the Amharic drama to flourish when he was appointed as Artistic Director of the then Haile Selassie Theatre.

The next artist in the literary arena is Menghistu Lemma, the witty, humorous but ironic and sarcastic playwright, who also attacked feudal hypocrisy with his suave and light expressions and witticisms that have permeated his subtle poems and plays. Indeed many have asserted that this man is the master of sharp wit and fine but biting criticism, for which he enjoys wide popularity.

As we continue delving deeper into the history and development of the Ethiopian drama, we encounter younger playwrights with a warm feeling for a change in the socio-economic structure of the society. Among these, the most conspicuous is Tesfaye Gessesse, who is at present the Artistic Director of the National Theatre. He is unique in that his life and study have been dedicated to drama and its production. This playwright and gifted actor has written and produced many plays that are concerned both with national and international issues.

Among the youngest and most attuned to revolutionary fervour is Ayalneh Mulat. He too is charged with revolutionary ideas. He is also a prolific writer who endeavours greatly to give voice to the momentous Ethiopian Revolution of 1974.

The history of Ethiopian drama must include those playwrights who spent their lives in writing topical and therefore perishable plays. In this category, we find Tesfaye Abebe, Woubshet Workalemahu, Eyoel Yohannes, Malaku Ashagrie and a few others. These have written plays of contemporary life with the sole purpose of creating a soothing or amusing diversion for those theatre-goers who have worked hard the whole week. Though categorized in this group, Tesfaye Abebe is somewhat different in that he has attempted to write about

serious matters, particularly at this time of revolutionary upheaval.

A recent development, yet a significant one, is the establishment of a Department of Theatre Arts in the Addis Ababa University, where future professionals are being trained. What was once considered a children's game in our country has now come to a stage where its practitioners are being trained at University level. The task of training people interested in the profession was started before the establishment of this Department in the University. Theatres like the National Theatre attempted and are still giving on-the-job training for a limited number of keen actors.

Due to the conducive atmosphere created by the revolutionary spirit, it will not be too long before we see theatre companies performing throughout the country; in my opinion, the tendency is clearly indicated.

CHAPTER TWO

THE METHOD OF MENGHISTU LEMMA'S COMEDY

I. Plot Design

A dramatist may visualize episodes extracted from the social interaction of people. However, he does not put together these bits and pieces of life casually without carefully establishing why one episode follows another. More often than not, the dramatist strictly observes the rules of plot design in which the question of cause and effect is fully answered.

In this way, Menghistu depicts the material world in which he lives, and which he has made his own. He has imaginatively perceived and depicted it in order to convince and enthrall his audience. Menghistu has paid serious consideration to the message and quality of what he depicts, and the way events are presented persuades his audience of their plausibility. The question of cause and effect is best answered in his mature work, Marriage of Unequals.

The plot in Marriage of Unequals is so impeccable that it can measure up to any standard of plot structure. It is based on the story of a foreign-educated protagonist who settles in a small village in Hararge Province, with the noble idea of educating and modernizing the villagers. As is customary, a village teacher in Ethiopia cannot manage to live alone without the aid of a maid-servant. That being so, Bahru, the main character, takes Beletie as his servant and goes down to Harar. They continue to live as master and servant for some time. However, Bahru then marries Beletie legally, because he feels she is quick to learn, in addition to having commendable beauty.

Nevertheless, Bahru's aunt, a feudal lady, wants him to marry his social peer, called Bibita, a girl who, like himself was educated in a foreign land. One bright morning two village elders call at Lady Alganesh's home and tell her that Bahru

is already married to his maid-servant, and that it is of no use to bother herself about another marriage.

Lady Alganesh angrily commands Bahru to send Beletie away and to marry Bibita. But he tries to persuade his obstinate aunt that Beletie, his servant-wife, has suited him perfectly and that he therefore does not want to take another wife. At this stage, the conflict between Bahru and his aunt becomes very sharp and critical.

Meanwhile, Lady Alganesh considers for a long time, only to arrive at the decision of using the wisdom of an astrologer. She instructs the astrologer to do all that he can to drive Beletie away from Bahru's home. The astrologer agrees wholeheartedly to do as she says.

The astrologer has no difficulty in penetrating Beletie's thoughts, because he used to frequent Bahru's place as a close acquaintance. He then drops in at Beletie's home and intimates to her with seeming earnestness that her horoscope does not match Bahru's favourably, and therefore her life is at stake. He adds that she must soon leave Bahru and seek another place. She takes his word for truth and disappears instantly.

However, a pebble-diviner, an arch-enemy of the astrologer, advises Beletie that she should rejoin Bahru, on the grounds that what the astrologer has told her is false. She accepts his advice readily, and returns home immediately through the mediation of one of the elders in the village.

To the great disappointment of Lady Alganesh and to the crushing shame of the astrologer, Beletie is back home re-establishing her marital status. At last, Lady Alganesh realizes that the so-called "wise men" are all impostors who dupe people just to earn their living. She then gives in to the wishes of her nephew, and the marriage of unequals is confirmed.

When we search for weaknesses in plot construction, we do not find many in this play. But there occur two incidents which seem to me plausible but improbable. The first one is the event which this omniscient dramatist records regarding the first meeting of Bahru and Beletie.

On his way to Lady Aleganesh, Bahru falls down on slippery ground, and his clothes are so soiled with mud that Beletie gives him her brother's Sunday-best suit to change into. Here, Menghistu wants us to believe that Bahru takes her as his servant because she does him a favour. But it is hard to swallow the probability of Bahru's gesture, because what one does on such occasions is probably to reward a benevolent woman such as Beletie either with money or in kind. Indeed, Lady Alganesh relates to us that Bahru offered Beletie some money for her thoughtfulness but she refused. What is normally done on such occasions is to thank one's benefactor and to go away. Otherwise, the good action is not grounds enough for Bahru to remunerate her in that way. In real life one must have more tangible reasons before one takes a woman as a servant; she must at least be good at cooking if she is to be chosen as a maid-servant. But Bahru requires none of these qualities. He simply employs her. Even if we accept this gesture as a reward, it appears indecent to take one's benefactor as a servant. If he were very much touched by her benevolence, Bahru should have taken her as his legal wife right at the beginning. But when he takes her as a servant, she is victimized rather than rewarded.

Nevertheless, this is the episode that gives rise to all the other subsequent events. If one does not want to become pedantic about such details in a dramatic creation, one may overlook the improbability of this incident, as it is customary to exploit plausibility in stagecraft.

The second weakness is at the end of the play, for its

denouement is not satisfactory by any dramatic standard. The play simply ends abruptly. Just as she is informed of Beletie's return home, Lady Alganesh realises that the wisdom of the astrologer is bogus, and she becomes resigned to the situation.

From the beginning up to this stage, she has maintained the same views regarding marriage. But all of a sudden, she dismisses all thought of class marriage. It is an abrupt and unsatisfactory ending, because dramatic hints have not been suggested to help the audience anticipate such a change in Lady Alganesh. If she had been sketched as a complex and fully-developed character, Lady Alganesh might have revealed new and surprising facets of personality to warrant such a change of attitude, thereby making the ending plausible.

In contrast to the action in Marriage of Unequals, some of the incidents in Marriage by Abduction are slapstick. This assertion can easily be proved if one closely examines the structure of the plot.

The framework of the plot in this play is that there are four friends who are educated and anxious to marry, but they are unable to do so because of the problems of choice and courting. In those days, girls were accused of being very much influenced by cars and beautiful villas when it came to marrying a man. Moreover, there were no places where a man and a girl could meet and discuss marriage. In addition to these basic issues, social and economic questions prevented them from deciding the matter.

These bachelors are faced with other basic difficulties. When they think of marriage with a grand feast, their finances do not allow them to indulge in that. When they want to marry without much expense, the girls do not agree, because they are seeking the limelight. Not only this, but there is another vital question that menaces the bachelors: should they marry the educated girl or the uneducated?

As they continue to think about the matter, one of them emerges as a theoretician who tries to see things in a new light. He embarks on the idea of abducting a girl to get out of these complications. Three of them agree to support this dying style of marriage.

Then they set out their plan into action. It is a wet day, and people are running in all directions to escape the rain. Some are standing in the rain and are looking at people driving cars imploringly to be offered a ride. It is at this critical time that the bachelors give a ride to the girl Tafessech. She is unable to turn down their offer because it is raining.

Later, however, they change direction and abduct her to a country villa, where she is to be held until the the marriage has been consummated.

Meanwhile, there arrives by chance a member of the group who is not involved in the conspiracy. This friend puts up a stiff resistance to their attempt at abduction, because he feels it is not right to make a girl a wife by force. Whether he resists or not, the act is under way, and he witnesses the whole affair. In spite of his condemnation of the act as brutal and uncivilized, the members of the conspiracy defend their position unflinchingly on the grounds that what they are doing is in harmony with tradition and with modern ways.

Accordingly, Bezabih, the protagonist, lacks courage to deflower the bride. Surprisingly enough, he calls her father the Negadras, and tells him that he can come and collect his daughter. The Negadras arrives and threatens the bachelors. However, he cannot discover who the abductor is, because Bezabih disappeared early in the morning, perhaps because of shame.

Subsequently, Fitawrari Merinie Tekwas, the father

of Wondayehu, a character who is in charge of preparations at home, suddenly arrives from a hunting expedition. The Fitawrari is a strong character, an exact contrast to the Negadras in all respects, and manages to cool the fury of the Negadras by telling the Negadras his own experience, an abduction of a girl as has happened between Tafessech and Bezabih.

Meanwhile Tafessech, upon hearing the discussion between the two elders, comes out of the room where she has spent the night with Bezabih. She tells her father that Bezabih, the abductor, is an honest man who did not touch her. She reiterates that she is still pure, but her father refuses to believe her. Finally, she daringly tells her father that she is going to marry Bezabih Tori. Her father is shocked at this, and returns home cursing his daughter for her bad manners.

It is here that we find more weaknesses in plot construction than in Marriage of Unequals. It is taken for granted that the plot a playwright designs must be credible. It gains its credibility only when we can establish the question of cause and effect. What is staged must not appear to the audience to be purely accidental. An action must remind the audience of a previous action, and must lend itself to showing another action that necessarily follows. But in this play, the causes for some incidents cannot be established. Even those incidents to which causes are attributed are sometimes not persuasive.

The abduction of Tafessech is, for example, accidental because they could not find the woman they were looking for. This is not convincing; surely a man does not abduct a girl who has not attracted him either physically or financially. This does not agree with common practice in Ethiopia. In fact, marriage is considered sacred. What used to be done

in the past was that, if a man wanted to abduct a girl, he had to plan the abduction. Bezabih and his friends try to make a grab at a lady of their choice, and when they fail to find her their choice falls on another girl whom they have never previously seen. This is sheer accident, and therefore cannot be accepted by any standard. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that these educated bachelors would be involved in such an adventure.

However, one might argue that these bachelors are desperate to marry, and that it is not unlikely that they might seize anyone they met. But surely they cannot be so desperate as to take an unknown girl for a wife, when it is possible to postpone the abduction until the girl for whom they have a liking succumbs to them. They are unduly hasty and thoughtless to abduct Tafessech just because she happens to be there. To say the least, it is an abuse of the idea of marriage.

It is common knowledge that a playwright depicts in his work a slice of life, and that the plot of the story should convince his audience. However, sometimes some playwrights may choose to depict wholly spiritual beings in their plays. The existence of these spiritual beings, in reality, can be doubted - in fact, denied. Nevertheless, the truth of the situation is that these beings are not too far away from reality, but are in fact a combination of reality and fantasy.

But such combinations are absent in Marriage by Abduction, and therefore we cannot take this episode as credible. Menghistu is usually a satirist who holds up a mirror to reflect real life; however, here we observe that he trespasses over the bounds of a satirist, and brings into his play an element of the grotesque.

But we are calmed down when we think of his dramatic talent. He has designed this episode in accordance with a

basic comic dramatic convention. Regarding this convention, L.J. Potts explains:

A comedy may . . . fail in its effect simply because the author has taken the pains to make the plot conform to the law of cause and effect; because he has insisted too ruthlessly on fate, and especially retribution.

Keeping this law in mind, Menghistu has endeavoured to exploit another dramatic law which capitalizes on the fact that "in comedy it is in the contrast and balance of characters that probability is concentrated and the imagination and originality of the writer is displayed".¹²

So the credibility of some of the events in Marriage by Abduction relies on contrast of characters and their views. Because of this, the contrast between Gelaglie, on the one hand, and Bezabih and his friends, on the other, or the contrast between the Negadras and the Fitawrari are examples worth considering. The repartee that we see in each line has the power to accord the episode originality, imagination and, most of all, probability.

Not only does Menghistu depend very much on dramatic devices other than contrast and balance of characters, but also he uses psychology to make credible another event. It is difficult for ordinary Ethiopian people, for example, to believe that Bezabih fails to deflower Tafessech after both of them are locked up in a room for the whole night. They might ascribe an unconvincing reason for his failure such as being incapable because of the interference of a demon or to impotence. Otherwise, a physically-sound person who is eager to have a wife does not fail to deflower a girl.

¹²Comedy (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1966), p. 118.

¹³Ibid., p. 119.

However, an educated person might accept the probability of the situation on the grounds that Bezabih is an educated person who later reached the decision that the girl should not be deflowered against her will. This appears to be a cogent reason, but it is not necessarily true. Bezabih's failure is a deliberate creation of the playwright, because he designs this episode in accordance with an important dramatic convention. Menghistu writes comedy, and comedy has formulas of its own. This vital dramatic rule explains:

In comedy we must feel that man is free, not fated - if anything goes wrong within him, the remedy is in his hands, . . . to show the free interplay of character you must release your men and women from the pressure of circumstance. You must, therefore, make your story either fantastic . . . or commonplace. . . .¹⁴

Menghistu, then, guided by this dramatic rule, created Bezabih as a man who refrains from becoming a tragic hero. Bezabih is a comic character; therefore he is not fated to suffer the consequences of his irrational act.

Menghistu goes far beyond the use of dramatic guidelines to establish credibility. He forces his readers or spectators to recall what Freud said regarding psychosexual trauma to accept the probability of this failure.

According to Freud, psychosexual trauma is

. . . a severe emotional shock experienced in conjunction with some activity in the realm of sex. This might be the combination of shame and fear, resulting from advances on the part of an adult; it might be the product of unduly harsh and repressive measures used by a parent to discourage manipulation of the organs, or it might be the result of one of a multitude of similar experiences.¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., p. 112

¹⁵Timothy J. Gannon, Psychology: The Unity of Human Behavior (Boston: Ginn and Comp., 1954), p. 283.

If we agree with this theory, Bezabih's inability to deflower Tafessech is due to the conflict between these two opposing forces. When he is urged to do it, the thought of being imprisoned, or of being unable to penetrate, intervenes and makes him impotent. When he is governed by fear, the feeling of shame is manifested and the thought of being ridiculed denies him peace. However, fear overrides shame and drives him away from the real activity. Therefore, what appears to be absurd becomes credible.

Even if one does not go as far as that in interpreting this episode, one may take as probable the fact that Bezabih realized that his move was short-sighted, and, because he was not fated, he controlled the situation and took sane measures not to violate the sanctity of the girl without her full consent. Thus, the credibility of the event becomes incontrovertible.

But there is still another incident in this play that we may refuse to accept. This is the denouement. In the denouement, we find the heroine trying to convince her father that Bezabih is modest and has not violated her virginity. When her father refuses to believe this, she erratically declares that she will marry Bezabih without obtaining the consent of her parents. It is unthinkable that even a modern girl like Tafessech would make such a swift and unilateral decision. When we examine her motive, we arrive at two possibilities, either of which may be difficult to accept.

First, we are made to think that the refusal of her father to believe what she tells him has driven her to declare that Bezabih is her chosen husband. Her change of mind does not have sufficient grounds. To think that Tafessech took that decision because her father refused to believe her is too flimsy to accept. A girl who struggles incessantly to remain pure even when she is in the bedroom, and who strives hard to

convince her father that she is still a virgin, would never change her mind all of a sudden to declare she would be married to an abductor. She feels that the whole world would know that she was pure when she married Bezabih.

Tafessech: If you refuse to believe me . . . that is all right with me! . . . For me it is the truth. The whole world will know it All Shoa will know it. When I marry Bezabih, you will know it was the truth.¹⁶

Does it mean that her marriage to Bezabih is proof of her still being a virgin? It is simply inconceivable. If she were determined to prove to her father that she was still a virgin, she might go with her father back home and marry another man. If that is impossible, she would urge Bezabih to tell her father that she was still a virgin. Otherwise, to declare to her father's face that she would marry Bezabih is not satisfactory in my opinion.

Secondly, we are also coaxed to believe that Tafessech's decision is proper because she found Bezabih well-behaved during the night and resolved to marry him on those grounds. But what is explicit and based on a reason, though on a weak one, is the first assumption. Even if we accept this interpretation as probable, a man under normal circumstances would in Ethiopia be considered a eunuch if he failed to deflower a girl after all that intensity of desire. If this had happened in the distant past, the best man would consummate the marriage when the bridegroom failed. Whatever the case, it is expected that a bride would not care to be his wife, let alone declare him her chosen husband to her father, as Tafessech did. However, it may be argued that Tafessech took Bezabih's resignation as an act of sanity. According to her,

16

"Marriage by Abduction", Act III, lines 1435-1441, p. 360.

COMEDY AND SOCIAL PURPOSE:
Two Plays of Menghistu Lemma

A Thesis
Presented to
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Master of Arts in Literature (English)

BY
AKALU GETANEH
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he has not failed to deflower her, but controlled himself and acted properly.

Tafessech is just complementary to Bezabih, portrayed to match his eccentricity. She is erratic. However modern a girl may be, the average Ethiopian girl would not dare tell her father that she will marry an unknown man because her father refuses to believe her to be a virgin. She would not dare to do so, because a father like the Negadras is usually respected, and, more than that, feared. Men of old were believed to be strict disciplinarians. One may contend that there have been girls who asserted themselves free to choose and marry a husband. One thing should not be overlooked. This play was written eighteen years ago. In those days girls were not as licentious as they are today. So it is difficult to think that Tafessech would have the courage to face up to her father like that. Even if we leave room for exceptions, girls asserted themselves freely only when they had found an appropriate mate. Some may want to extend the argument by saying that Bezabih might have appeared to be an appropriate mate for Tafessech in the short period of their contact. To comply with this assumption, however, would mean that deep acquaintance is not necessary before marriage. It is equivalent to approving of abduction as a proper mode of marriage.

However, it is a deliberate design of the playwright that Tafessech's revelation is absurd, because he wants the play to have a surprise ending. In addition to that, because the playwright wants to prove his point, he ends the play with their marriage, but it ends in an unconvincing manner. He could have proved his theme by adopting the traditional method: the husband's parents could have sent elders the next morning to confront and reassure the girl's parents; thereby bringing peace.

2. Characterization

When we consider character and characterization, it is imperative that we criticize the players on the stage if they lack credibility or depth or some other indispensable quality which we expect to observe in any dramatic character. To give credibility to his characters, the playwright takes precautions in portraying them. He deems it essential to create his characters to reflect a high degree of reality.

There are, at least, three levels of characterization and character delineation in any literary work. Regarding this, Gerald Weales records, "The range is from extremely complicated personalities, realistically presented, to complete abstractions."¹⁷ However, here our concern is with those characters that are realistically presented, because these are Menghistu's favourites. Objectively presented characters are readily identified by the audience, because they are the familiar types. Lady Alganesh, for example, is a typical feudal lady who is pontifical, pompous, hypocritical and snobbish. She is a stock character whom the audience knows on first sight, because her behaviour, motivation and mannerisms are part of the store of information the audience brings to the theatre. Lady Alganesh is portrayed by feudal habits characterized by sham, domination, overweening self-respect and contempt for the unlucky workers. She is familiar to the audience, because she is an accepted stereotype due to her long and "respectable" family history. Above all, the audience knows exactly how she will behave, because her actions follow logically from the attitude she holds.

Not only is Lady Alganesh a stock character, but also the priest, the skeikh, the astrologer, the diviner and Bahru are, too. We can recognize them right away when we see them on the stage. Once they are introduced, they do not develop and then change their mental positions as round

¹⁷ A Play and its Parts (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964), p.28.

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¹⁷ A Play and its Parts (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964), p.28.

characters do. Therefore, no matter when or where we meet these characters, we can recognize them readily.

We can liken Lady Alganesh to Congreve's Lady Wishfort of The Way of the World, because both of them are preoccupied with the notion of high birth and infatuated with pedigree. More than anything else, they are occupied with the concept of marriage based on lineage and property. Lady Alganesh wants Bahru to marry Bibita because Bibita comes from a rich family. Lady Wishfort also wants to win Sir Wilfull for her niece, Millamant, and Sir Rowland, Mirabell's disguised servant, for herself.

Why does a playwright create flat characters? The answer is not difficult to find. He depicts flat characters when he is more interested in particular ideas that have to be repeatedly attacked than in showing the various facets of personality in his characters. He sets out to show conflicts between opposing ideas. In other words, the playwright is less interested in internal conflict, but stresses external circumstances. To serve his purpose, flat characters will do best. Therefore, both in Marriage of Unequals and Marriage by Abduction, Menghistu uses this approach because he thinks that "... his message can be clearer if he uses stereotypes which he knows an audience will accept as representing particular attitudes, classes, races and religion".¹⁸ Menghistu has not lost sight of the fact that the stereotype is a select device of characterization in purposeful comic drama, because comic characters personify static attitudes and prejudices which the social critic makes the butt of his criticism. These attitudes and prejudices have to be attacked until (hopefully) they are removed from the minds of those who cherish them. It becomes easy to attack them effectively only when they show themselves repeatedly in stereotypes.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 36.

Above all, he has also used these stereotypes to make his points clear on the concepts of marriage. His two unconventional marriages are treated at length and therefore given prominence to serve him to ridicule feudal standards and the educated young men of words but not of deeds. The two respective protagonists, for example, remain flat throughout the plays, because they air unchanging views.

Bahru, in Marriage of Unequals, consistently insists that he is content with his marriage with Beletie, though she is not his social peer.

Bahru: Send who? Beletie? Why should I do that? She does her work properly. She rises with the early-morning bird, makes coffee, cooks kinche, beats the abish and serves me breakfast in bed. You like an accomplished maid and she is one.¹⁹

Bezabih in Marriage by Abduction also sticks to the view he adopted at first. He pursues the view, " . . . the only solution to all the problems of modern marriage, the great expenses, the abracadabra, . . . for all these problems I see no other solution but marriage by abduction."²⁰

Not only these two, but also all the other characters are stereotypes. Menghistu has successfully manipulated these stock characters. These two plays are his first, and he starts with characters that are less difficult to depict. It is wise that he started with this method, because the creation of a familiar character is a stepping-stone to the successful creation of characters of depth and mystery.

But the question is, how do we differentiate between a

¹⁹ Marriage of Unequals, Act I, Scene ii, lines 1365-1369, pp. 47-48.

²⁰ "Marriage by Abduction", Act I, Scene ii, lines 1151-1157, p. 336.

stock character and a richer one? M.H. Abram contends:

A flat character . . . is presented only in outline without much individualizing detail and so can readily be described in a single phrase or sentence. A round character is a complex and fully realized individual, and therefore is as difficult to describe with any adequacy as most people are in real life.²¹

A close look at the characters in both plays would prove that none of them is a character of depth and mystery. Not even the protagonists show a multiplicity of characteristics. Each of them can be adequately described in a single sentence: Bahru is a man for whom all men are born free and equal, and therefore it is immaterial whether one comes from a rich family or not. That is the sum total of his behaviour. We do not observe complicated facets of personality in him. Furthermore, Bezabih, in his own eccentricity of character, is a philosopher in fantasy for whom the younger generation of men are desiccated in their courage, virility and determination, and therefore they are unable to carry out the task of abducting a would-be wife like the men of old. But the irony of it is that he fails to do it himself.

The reason that Menghistu's characters are all uncomplicated is that he capitalizes on ideas, leaving action aside. Both of his plays are plays of ideas in which action is relegated to a secondary position or totally disregarded. In fact, inexplicability of character emanates from action, for which a definite motive may not be established.

The fact that Menghistu capitalizes on ideas rather than on action is very well brought out, more particularly in Marriage by Abduction than in Marriage of Unequals. With regard to propagating new ideas, he wants to demonstrate these points:

We should change, but we should not uproot ourselves in the process, for that is no change. It is true

²¹A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964). p.70.

that even in the days of Menelik this short cut of marriage by abduction was not practiced as much as it should be by the whole population. But today, the solution to all the problems of modern marriage, the great expenses, the abracadabra, the shameless copying of the Ferenji [foreigners], this monkey's imitation of everything that is European, for all these problems I see no other solution but marriage by abduction. . . . We are carrying all the burden of old habits and customs that the Ferenji have discarded years and years ago as useless and out of date.²²

Insofar as this "short cut" is to be emphasized, his characters need not be individualized or rounded.

On the character level, Bezabih is the master mind of the idea of abduction, and theorizes very much on it. He is delineated as an extremely over-confident character in the beginning, and as an utter failure in the end. The playwright seems to prove that a man of words cannot be a man of deeds. But in the main, Menghistu is laughing at the impractical young men of the 1960's. As far as he understood them, they knew only how to theorize, but they were in practice impotent. These "men of words and not deeds" are a source of derision for him. Bezabih, who is the representative of the impotent young men, confesses that he lacks initiative, but does not give the underlying reason for his resignation from the task of deflowering the bride. His action is indeed a source of laughter. A man who "puts on a strong claim on being a man of action" surely induces laughter when he falls short of materializing it. Bezabih boasted that it "can and must be done" in the beginning, with an "air of a quiet, determined and highly serious young man". His failure may be ascribed to internal conflict. However, the reason may not be explicable, unless we ferret out the secret by implication.

²²"Marriage by Abduction", Act I, Scene ii, lines 1147-1160, p. 336.

Character and situation creations are determined by two factors: the ability of the playwright and the type of the play. The playwright is efficient in creating comic characters and comic situations while the type of the play is comedy, tilted towards farce.

According to Weales, there are three conventions that a dramatist should observe when creating his stage characters. They are created in such a way that the audience identifies them "by the character's words; by the character's actions; {and} by the reactions, in words or act, of other characters".²³

In his two plays, Menghistu has used all of these methods and his own descriptions to reveal his characters. In Marriage of Unequals, for example, we know the character of Bahru from his own words and from what the Aleka, the Hadji and Lady Alganesh say about him.

Bahru is romantic and frolicsome. We realize this from what he does to Beletie in Act One Scene One. His own words indicate that Bahru is lovable, easy to be with and pure in heart.

Bahru: Come, quick. Come and give me a kiss. We last kissed three days ago. Do you hear me? It is an order!²⁴

This is a mock order that he gives to Beletie, which reveals his love of fun at the same time. Here he frolics with his maid-servant, an act which brings out his sense of respect for all alike, regardless of their origin. If he did not believe in the equality of men, he would not dare to make love to a girl like Beletie, coming from a rich family himself. Not only is he pure and just in his judgement of all human beings, but also he detests making distinctions between

²³Weales, p. 8.

²⁴Marriage of Unequals, Act I, Scene 1, lines 32-33, p. 2.

"superior" and "inferior" lineages. This attitude is revealed to us through the words of Lady Alganesh.

Lady Alganesh: . . . 'Man is man', he declared. Does he care? Not an iota! 'Since man is man,' said he, 'man equals man. And since man is equal to man, man must be equated to man,' quoth Bahru. 'The master and servant category is old-fashioned, out-of-date, a remnant of ancient customs overlaid thick with dust which must be resolutely swept away,' he said.²⁵

These lines testify that Bahru has overcome any class prejudice he might have inherited against the poor. He is not a pseudo-intellectual who deceives himself by pretending that all men are born free and equal, while he still feels like Lady Alganesh that some men are of "the best pedigree" and others of "the worst" who might "cast a blemish on one's progeny", if mingled with the former. Unlike Lady Alganesh, Bahru understands men's relationship in terms of a one-to-one correspondence; thereby considering as fake the imbalance between the rich and the poor which had long possessed the minds of the "haves", as opposed to the "have-nots".

The Alaka and the Hadji tell us a lot about Bahru too.

Hadji: . . . his coming is a God-send for us.
He teaches our children.

Aleka: . . . our village is looking lively.

Hadji: In matters of cleanliness, it is ten times better than it used to be.

Aleka: Even old people like us are no exception; we attend evening classes where he teaches us the foreign alphabet. . . .²⁶

What we can understand from this dialogue is that Bahru is an innovator in a country village. Moreover, he is a dynamic

²⁵ Ibid., lines 668-673, p. 27.

²⁶ Ibid., lines 525-532, p. 24.

enlightener who has shown willingness to sacrifice his foreign education to set free these people from their age-old benightedness.

Lady Alganesh is known by her own words and her actions. The two elders, the Aleka and the Hadji, are also known from what they say of Bahru, Beletie and other people. The two impostors, Ayya Lizibu and Aba Mirmito, are identified by what they say of each other and from what they do to earn their living.

Unlike Marriage of Unequals, in Marriage by Abduction all the characters are introduced in the play as they appear on the stage for the first time. Menghistu introduces them by giving a brief description of each of them. The main character is, for example, very well introduced:

He is on the tallish side, head erect and with a natural inborn pride. He has piercing eyes, high forehead, and the air of a quiet, determined and highly serious young man. . . . Bezabih is not only a man of thought and contemplation, but he puts a strong claim on being a man of action as well.²⁷

All that he utters matches with what is said of Bezabih here by the author. What has been omitted in the author's own description about Bezabih is complemented by what other characters such as Merinie Tekwas, Arega, Wondayehu and Yesehak find to say. This old technique, the playwright's description of characters, which is still popular in contemporary drama, has helped Menghistu, like any other dramatist, to become an artist in dramatic work. The fact that he has exploited all available dramatic techniques of character portrayal has helped him to bring out all his characters who are the embodiments of his ideas. Furthermore, these techniques have also helped the audience to know everything about the characters, and, above

²⁷"Marriage by Abduction", Act I, Scene i, lines 265-271, p. 326.

all, about the message of the plays which the author has tried to impress upon them. In addition to that, Menghistu has used various methods with a view to showing the ridiculousness of the feudal attitudes he attacks or exposes.

In Marriage by Abduction, his method of character revelation can be said to be eclectic, in that he has used both old and modern methods. But in Marriage of Unequals, he has used only modern methods. He has taken precautions against the danger of depending solely on a character's self-revelation. He has, of course, used this method to some degree. Nevertheless, he has ensured that whatever a character says on the stage about himself may not help to identify him with certainty, because equivocation might slip into his lines or even into his words; thereby causing misunderstanding. So Menghistu is careful to use varied methods to portray his characters, without leaving loopholes to cause confusion.

One of the most important dramatic methods in character portrayal is action. But in Menghistu's plays, it is used minimally. Particularly in Marriage of Unequals, action plays a very slight role, as this play is a satire which ridicules the jaded social values of an archaic society. Nevertheless, to a lesser extent, he has used action in this play to reveal some of his characters. As the curtain rises for the first time in Act One Scene One, we observe the romantic gambolling of Bahru and Beletie; the former to catch and give the latter a morning kiss, while the latter tries to swerve and escape the unwarranted gaiety of the former. This action indicates to the audience that Bahru is a victim of a Western habit which he has not yet abandoned, even after he returned to Ethiopia, where kissing is seldom practised in the early morning. It further enlightens the audience that Bahru is kind at heart, a man who has given himself to the idea that all men irrespective of colour, class, or creed are equal. Not only is this action suggestive of Bahru's good nature, but it also brings

out that Beletie is an unsophisticated country girl, to whom such a romantic gesture is un-Ethiopian and therefore unpalatable.

To cite but one instance of the use of action as a dramatic device in Marriage by Abduction, it is sufficient to mention the display of Wondayehu's fear at the time when Negadras Workneh comes to attack the abductors. His pseudo-modesty is indicative of his boundless cowardice, and this is exhibited with extreme excitement, which in itself betrays Wondayehu. His trembling in the face of such a threatening force enables the audience to understand that he is a boaster in time of peace but a coward in time of danger. He is like a rooster at first but turns into a chick later.

"Action speaks louder than words," says the proverb. Indeed, sometimes even words may not serve in place of action to convey a message effectively. Maintaining a similar view, Weales states that action as a method of character revelation is indispensable in drama, because ". . . the playwright can use what a character does to indicate what he is like".²⁸ Surely, we would not have known Wondayehu's cowardice, if it had not been for his action.

Apart from a character's words and action, another method of characterization is the reaction of other characters, either in words or action, which a playwright uses as a device to bring out the behaviour of his chief characters. By reaction is meant the responses either in words or action of other characters to what a particular character says or does.

This method is used widely by Menghistu in both of his plays. Observe what happens to Negadras Workneh in the wake of his daughter's abduction. At the time when the Negadras was intimidating the bachelors, the Fitawrari intercedes with

²⁸ Weales, p. 41.

him on behalf of the abductors. After discussing the whole affair for some time, the Negadras cools and begins to ask some naive questions regarding the chastity of his daughter. The Fitawrari's reaction profoundly reveals the naivety of the Negadras. The Fitawrari replies thus:

Fitawrari: To say, after all that has happened, that virginity is still obtaining, even to doubt of its existence has no meaning, no logic. May God show it to you on the one hand, you have a girl who has reached the age-of-Fve, young, beautiful - on the other hand, you have a young man who has reached the age-of-Adam, virile, handsome; and having locked these together in one little bed-room for a whole night, to still expect the next morning that virginity will be there.

. . . Well! This is saying "I have a cow in heaven!" "O moon, drop me a loaf of bread!" Such things never happen.²⁹

From this reply, we deduce that the Negadras is gullible and credulous, a person who takes things at their face value and never bothers to appraise them critically. According to what is exposed by Tafessech about her chastity, the Fitawrari's assumption is baseless. However, the credulous Negadras accepts the Fitawrari's explanation of the situation as true, and stops asking any more such naive questions.

Negadras: I see it now . . . It is my own foolishness to hope for its existence.³⁰

This answer also testifies that the Negadras is incapable of evaluating circumstances with a calculating mind, and this is sharply replied to by the discerning Merinie Tekwas, the Fitawrari, with an air of superiority and sureness, though he is in the wrong.

²⁹ "Marriage by Abduction", Act III, lines 1365-1376, p. 359.

³⁰ "Marriage by Abduction", Act II, Scene ii, lines 461-466, p. 91.

Even in Marriage of Unequals, the astrologer is replied to sternly by Lady Alganesh. His duplicity is then exposed.

Lady Alganesh: It is all my fault, not yours. It is I who forgot about your antics during the Italian invasion, how your repeated attempts to turn the soldato's macaroni into worms miserably failed and we were almost massacred for it. No, you are not to blame; it is my own credulity.³¹

This verbal retort conveys that Lizebu, the astrologer, is a traditional impostor whose trickery is at last discovered by the lady. Her reaction is, of course, one of disappointment. But the lines reveal something else about the lady too.

When one character reacts to another, say, by showing boredom, happiness, fear, admiration, surprise or common courtesy, the audience learns something about both of them. Thus, the lady's reaction to Lizebu not only brings out the personality of Lizebu, but that of the lady herself. Despite her previous knowledge of the long-existing duplicity of the astrologer, she has continued to believe that he is capable of doing the impossible; that is, he could chase Deletie away with his charm. Her reaction to Lizebu also shows that, though she knew the ineffectiveness of his wisdom even at the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, she could not learn her lesson. She wants to use him in her attempt to avert the marriage of "unequals".

One of the dramatic methods that we do not find used in Menghistu's plays is non-verbal reaction. Though this device is considered as effective as the spoken word, no occasion seems to have tempted Menghistu to use it even in one of his plays. What one can think about its omission is that Menghistu has not found this contrivance necessary to indicate what his characters are like, because the other methods he has used have served him effectively.

³¹Marriage of Unequals, Act II, Scene ii, lines 461-466.
p. 91.

3. Language

The language of drama is said to be at the core of the play, around which all the other dramatic elements converge. By the way definition, dramatic language is nothing more than the dialogue uttered by the characters. It is one of those dramatic media in which the characters express their plight, happiness, and the relations they have with other characters. In addition to this, in their dialogue, the characters intimate to the audience the magnitude of their problems or success in life compared and contrasted with the fortunes of other characters. In other words, they bring out in their conversation the objective realities in which these characters and their counterparts are found.

Though it appears that dramatic language is, to some extent, different from language used in ordinary social interactions, it works very much in the same way as the latter. But the difference between the two registers of language is that language on the stage is governed by specific dramatic rules, whereas language offstage is not.

The effectiveness of dialogue is seen in relation to the smooth progress of the plot. Its terseness must carry the plot forward without undue haste or undue awkwardness.

Regarding the necessity of precision in stage language, Debebe Seifu writes,

ፀሐፊተኔቱ ታላቅተኔቱን የጫፈው . . . በተዋገደን አጣካይነት
አንዳሳጣለት ነው፣ በተደራሲያኑ ዕዝነ ሥጋና ዕዝነ ንሊና አንዲ
ደርሰ ወገኛ ቀላልና ገልጽ መሆን አለበት፡፡ ተደራሲያኑ ከባድና
ጭናፍና ታላ ታላቅተኔቶች ሲሆኑ ገጽ-ባሕርዩን /ተዋገደን/ አስቲ
አንድ ጊዜ የይ አሁን ያልከው አልገባኝም ሊሉት አይችሉም፡፡ ይህን
የትያትር ዘልጭቡ አይፈቀዱም፣ በፍጹም በአፃፋቸው በመጽሐፍ መልክ
ያሉም ነገር አይደለምና ደጋገመው ደጋገመው በጣንበብ አስላ ለካ

አንደዚህ ማለቱ ኖሯል አያሉ የጻፍንታችን ቃለ ተውኔት ዕንቁፅልሽ
አሚያም ከዘጠነኛ አሚሩ ብቸኑ ጊዜ አያገኙም፡፡³²

Therefore, it becomes the prime concern of the playwright to see that his dialogue is written in clear terms immune from verbosity. Moreover, not only should a playwright be vigilant against using verbosity but also he should use language that is proper to the type of play he is writing. If he uses precise language in his play, the dramatist must observe certain overriding dramatic essentials that of necessity dictate his language. Weales records, "The kind of language that a playwright uses depends on the playwright himself - the kind of play he wants to write, the character he creates, the century he writes in."³³ In the light of this, what makes the playwright's language acceptable or not is whether or not it is suited either to a comic or a tragic play. In other words, if the playwright has used tragic language in a comic drama or comic language in a tragic play, then he is certainly a failure in his use of language.

As pointed out by Weales, the second dramatic rule governing the playwright's language is the type of character he creates. This rule is seen in the type of play he is writing. One who writes comedy is not in general supposed to depict tragic characters. The reverse is true of tragedy. Something

³² "Dialogue: The Theory of Writing a Play" (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, July, 1977), pp. 35-36. (Mimeographed). The dialogue is written just to be heard and understood clearly by the audience. When the audience hear complicated and confusing dialogue, they are not able to express doubt or incomprehension, because they cannot request the actor to repeat his words or lines. The norm of the theatre does not allow for such interruption during a performance. The language of a play is not at the disposal of the audience like the language in a book; enabling them to wrestle with its meaning by reading and re-reading it at will. [Trans. by researcher.]

³³ Weales, p. 45.

else that a playwright should bear in mind during moments of character-drawing is that his characters do not utter comic lines while the state of their minds suggests a saturnine temperament. If he is portraying tragic characters who are going downhill, he should realize that they cannot play the clown; in real life they may, but in the short glimpse of life given in a play, this would confuse the audience.

Now, the playwright who has endeavoured to harmonize the play with its characters must also be certain that his language is also in harmony with the language of the period of the play and the characters. Every age has its own peculiar characteristic features by which it is identified as different from all other ages. Among those peculiarities that an age may have is language which bears its stamp. The reason is not far to find: language shows evolution, thereby leaving certain marks to the credit of that age. Therefore, these unique marks should show up in the dialogue of the play.

It is worthwhile trying to evaluate Menghistu's style. As we probe into his language, we notice that he has written both of his plays in colloquial prose and literary prose. He has not used poetic language, although he is a master of poetry.

There are valid reasons why Menghistu has written in prose. It appears that it is based on the reasoning that people do not speak in poetry, and that the audience will find it difficult to understand the message transmitted in that medium. This may be true especially of our country, where the majority of the people are illiterate. So it is easy to infer that Menghistu preferred to write his plays in prose to make matters simple and to reach a large audience.

The argument seems reasonable, but it is with reservation that the researcher consents to it, because one cannot assert with certainty that illiterates do not speak in poetry. They do use poetic language in their daily life, though not as much

as prose. To prove this fact, it is sufficient to cite funeral songs, harvest songs, Christmas sport railings at the game of genna, and folktales. But the question is: How often do the illiterate use poetry to express themselves in their interactions? They seldom use poetry in their social activities. Therefore, Menghistu's preference to write his plays in prose is justified.

Whether it is in prose or poetry, stage language must be easy to vocalize, because it is the language that is heard from the stage. Regarding this, Weales contends,

. . . a playwright once said that he did not think like a literary man, that words did not come to him as patterns on the stage, but as speeches from the mouth of some character or other. This is one distinction between the playwright and other kinds of writers: he does not see a line in his mind's eye, he hears in his mind's ear.³⁴

Likewise, Menghistu has worked painstakingly to make his lines appropriate for the stage. However, his lines are not entirely colloquial in form, but subtle and intricate. This has raised the play's artistic value.

Above all, his dialogue is not likely to be spoiled by actors through reading or during stage performance, due to the lines' artistic strength, which implies the choice of diction and the arrangement of the tone of the language employed. Added to that, Menghistu's lines do not need help from actors to correct deficiencies, because the dialogue is vigorous and rapid, with the manner of the individual characters clearly brought out. More than anything else, it is written as appropriately as possible for the characters who speak them. Even a lazy actor cannot harm such lines.

Beletia: Here is the water. You had better wash now.

³⁴Weales, p. 47.

Bahru: Bless you, my girl. This is what I call a practical young lady.³⁵

Bezabih: Go on, Gelaglie, continue please. . . .

Gelaglie: I have had my say. Of course, Yesehak and company only laugh. Go on, laugh, laugh, laugh!³⁶

These are such impeccable lines that spectators are unable to question whether these characters could speak in this manner, since they are written after much effort to match them with the characters.

Besides, these lines have more to say about the dramatist. Menghistu is endowed with the power of imagination, so that he has made these characters speak in close relationship to their counterparts in real life. The lines are written in colloquial prose to help give reality to what happens on the stage; that is, it is real to the eye and to the ear, because what happens on the stage is received through these two faculties.

Though the language of these lines is colloquial prose, there is a great deal of literary prose too. This style is profusely used particularly in Marriage by Abduction, because most of the characters are educated young men. We have Bahru also in Marriage of Unequals; his language is refined, as compared to that of the country folk. However, due to his interaction with the unsophisticated villagers, his language is permitted to show some signs of their rural speech. Nevertheless, his memorable lines that indicate country life clearly show how much his language is polished.

Bahru (rising and pacing): Never before have I found living in this world more gratifying than at this particular juncture of my life. I am at

³⁵ Marriage of Unequals, Act I, Scene i, lines 144-145, p. 5.

³⁶ "Marriage by Abduction", Act I, Scene ii, lines 810-814, p. 332.

last in my country. Up until now, although I did find myself physically on Ethiopian soil, spiritually, I was still in Europe. I regained my true identity only after coming out into the country, to this village. Now, the spirits of the hills and mountains embrace me; the soil hugs me close; the stones speak to me; the trees whisper in my ears, the water is sweet to me; the air nourishes me.³⁷

These lines measure up to the standards of literary prose. But they might not be as suave as they are in the Amharic version, because some of the flavour is lost in the attempt to translate them into English. In Amharic, these lines are flawless. They awaken reminiscences of one's country in a person who is in a foreign land.

To hear Lady Alganesh in contrast to Bahru may make Menghistu's eclectic approach to stage language clear.

Lady Alganesh: Have you no sibirin? I can give you some. I never travel without sibirin.

Bahru: I have aspirin, thank you. Please do not bother.³⁸

Here the distinction between the language of the two characters is tangible enough to prove that Menghistu uses colloquial prose and literary prose side by side in his dramatic piece, Marriage of Unequals. But the balance is very much tilted towards colloquial prose, because many of his characters are drawn from the rural neighbourhood where colloquial speech is predominant.

When we examine the type of language used in Marriage by Abduction, in the same manner the bulk of its text is intellectualized, because it is a comedy in which heated intellectual

³⁷ Marriage of Unequals, Act I, Scene ii, lines 98-107, pp. 37-38.

³⁸ Marriage of Unequals, Act II, Scene ii, lines 22-24, p. 28.

discussions and philosophical questions are pursued by characters drawn from the elite group. The young men involved in the discussion use literary prose to air their views. Most of their lines may not be beautiful, but they are characteristic. Taking one portion of dialogue might prove the point:

Wondayehu: When the day comes, when the day of action arrives, who will want a philosopher like you, Gelaglie? If you were a man you would have abducted Belaynesh a long time ago and married her. A marriage by abduction! A romantic marriage fitting for a philosopher hero!

Gelaglie: Thank you for your kind advice? As one would say in the new anglicized Amharic: "Your advice is supported by a walking stick of brotherly sentiment." But when I marry, I will marry her, and she will not marry me. And when I marry it will be in strict accordance with the practices and traditions of our fathers.³⁹

These young men are discussing a marriage tradition in a rehashed manner; rehashed because they are not introducing a new marriage custom but reviving an old one. They are wrestling with each other in a hair-splitting argument concerning abduction. The lines given to each of them are free of grammatical errors, because both of them are educated individuals. However, their lines bear a touch of colloquial language.

Alongside the elite, we find Negadras Workneh Birru and Fitawrari Merinie Tekwas exchanging views on abduction in a regional dialect. A casual choice of their dialogue can show the nature and tenor of their language!

Fitawrari: Indeed her name is Tafessech. Yes, she is Tafessech all right; she has been abducted just like the literal meaning of her name! . . .

Negadras: I don't quite follow, Fitawrari; your talk is too mysterious . . . too refined . . .

³⁹"Marriage by Abduction", Act I, Scene 1, lines 169-174, p. 325.

Fitawrari: Oh, God! Am I not telling you? They have done this thing after having taken counsel with each other, in complete agreement, with the full consent of the girl herself. That is what I am telling you.⁴⁰

These lines are filled with oral expressions and overworked terms. But due to the difficulties incurred in translation, the characteristic features of the spoken Amharic are not brought out here. One who reads the Amharic text would certainly notice the colloquial touch and trite countryside terms and expressions. This is particularly true of the Fitawrari's speech. It is typical of this character that he often swears in the name of the forty-four icons, like any other man who strongly professes the Orthodox faith. Furthermore, he pronounces certain words like a typical Gonderie or Gojjamie. To cite but two of them, we find the words "lidz" and "tadia" pronounced as "liz" and "zadia", respectively, in the above dialogue in the Amharic version. Such distinctive speech features are not found in the Negadras' lines, though he is of the same type as the Fitawrari. Since the Negadras is a town dweller, this may be given as an excuse for the better quality of the register of his colloquial language.

The use of these words and expressions on the part of the playwright is for a purpose: to add meaning to the play's settings, action and theme. Firstly, they are appropriate to the situations in which they are used. Secondly, as the characters utter these words, they express their attitudes towards the theses they support or oppose, which in a way adds meaning to the themes also.

Menghistu has not only recreated colloquial speech, but he has also given it artistic form. Indeed, because the Amharic language is rich and vital, it helps Menghistu to become rich

⁴⁰"Marriage by Abduction", Act III, lines 1183-1195, p.357.

in his words and full of thought and information, but his individual effort has added a great deal of beauty and flavour to them in return. Moreover, undoubtedly, his Geez knowledge has contributed substantially in making his language qualitative, and his reflection of reality comprehensive. In fact, he sometimes raises the standard of his colloquial prose to the level of literary prose, even though he tries to indicate a particular regional accent. His uneducated characters do not speak as rustic men do in the circumstances. Here is, for example, the Aleka of the Marriage of Unequals relating to Lady Alganesh and the Hadji an episode he encountered while in Addis Ababa:

Aleka: Hadji, you know about it. There was this young thing dressed in long pants so tight it made his thighs bulge and the buttocks stare hard at the passers-by. He wore flimsy sandals, short hair, and was sliding along.⁴¹

This is not an ordinary conversation. It is a speech in which the sentences are carefully structured to be uttered from the stage. Though Menghistu has raised the standard of his colloquial language, he has nonetheless denied the countryside Amharic its typical characteristics. As can be seen in the Aleka's lines, the countryside language is as usual rich in metaphors such as "bulging thighs" and "staring buttocks", with, of course, the touch of a learned pen.

This achievement in language appropriateness and beauty proves that, though Menghistu is simple and down-to-earth in his language, he has not forgotten that a piece of literary work must attain a high standard. He therefore makes each point without fuss, patiently building up the picture. Most of all, he has shown superb ability in finding powerful words and phrases to give animation to the pictures he draws and to harmonize them

⁴¹ Marriage of Unequals, Act I, Scene ii, lines 735-739, p. 30.

In general, this playwright knows that the language in his plays belongs not only to himself but to his characters as well. It is easily discernible that he has always considered the words in his plays in the context of the situation. To say the least, his language is effective in what it does; that is, it carries along the play, working as a part of the characterization and action. We listen to the lines with pleasure, because they are written with care so that they can accomplish their mission. In other words, we do not listen to the words simply for their incidental beauty, but we listen and see what happens on the stage, as the play is inextricably bound up with what the characters say.

As he has intimated to the writer in an interview, Menghistu is, to some degree, grateful to Bernard Shaw, Molière, Chekhov and Ibsen in techniques of writing for the theatre. These people were the best writers of plays; for they had fine ways of their own dramatic creation worth imitating.

CHAPTER THREE

SATIRE AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

Menghistu could rightly be called an anthropologist and a playwright. This statement can be justified by examining his plays: Marriage by Abduction and Marriage of Unequals.

As an anthropologist, Menghistu gives an account of such traditional customs as the art of pebble-divining, astrology, the feudal norms of master-servant relationships, superstitions in match-making, marriage by capture and class marriage, feudal pretentiousness in saint-worshipping, the tradition of paying tribute to the landed gentry by the peasantry, the traditional boasting of the nostalgic warriors of old, and the boundless optimism of the younger generation of the educated class in using an outdated system of marriage in the face of rapid social and political upheaval. As a dramatist, this playwright has used these anthropological details to bring out the underlying theme of his plays: the clash between traditionalism and modernization. His profound knowledge and portrayal of these traditional customs and values has undoubtedly helped him to show vividly what happens in human interactions when the old clashes with the new in Feudal Ethiopia.

Western education was introduced during the reign of Emperor Menelik the Second, and has long urged cultural modernization. More precisely, its "Introduction . . . occurred during the last years of Menelik's eventual reign (1889-1913)".⁴²

Some foreign-educated young Ethiopian men and women have brought and spread the Western way of life and thinking in Ethiopia; one of them is Menghistu Lemma. Not only natives but also expatriates have contributed significantly to the same effect. However, this stimulus has borne fruit to a

⁴² John Markakis, Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity (Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 144.

of the 1960's found themselves. It is self-evident that whoever went to the modern type of school in Ethiopia was caught up in a paradox: there was the family circle where he had to learn respect for indigenous culture, on the one hand, and the conditioning of the Western system of education which tended to criticize traditional customs, on the other. Therefore, whoever grew up under such circumstances was liable to vacillate between the old and the new ways.

Regarding this dilemma, a prominent scholar, John Markakis, records,

Inevitably, the process of modern education tends to estrange the person from his environment. As they advance through the educational system, most Ethiopian students are separated from their families due to the necessity of moving into the few large towns where the more advanced facilities are concentrated. Separation becomes permanent since the educated group finds employment in the urban centres and is loath to return to the stagnant milieu of provincial Ethiopia. Intellectually, the educated Ethiopian is alienated from traditional culture and is prone to regard it as the carriers of the manifold ills that affect his society.⁴⁴

Not only were they troubled by the problem of a choice between two indispensables, the students were also disheartened because their education was questioned by the traditional people. They were "distrusted [by the traditionalists] because of their missionary connections and disliked for their assumption of European customs. . . ."⁴⁵

Now the adherence to traditional values calls for a systematic training right from the beginning, when one first enters the modern type of school system. But this was not the case with Ethiopian students. The moment they entered this type of school system, Ethiopian students adopted alien attitudes towards everything indigenous, because modern

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 188

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 144

education apparently despised traditionalist outlooks. Their attitude toward manual labour is a very good example to illustrate this point. As far as they were concerned, manual work should be performed by rustics. They thought their education authorized them to abstain from manual work, and this attitude was also entertained by some parents. Theory and practice seldom collaborated in this country. Haile Gabriel Dagnie, an educator by training, has very well observed the divorce of theory and practice:

በባህላችን የቀለም ጥምርት ለጉልበት ሥራ ይገባል
 ዕውቀት አላበረከቱም፡፡ የቀለምና የጉልበት ሥራ ከባድ
 ጊዜ ጀምሮ ተለያይተዋል፡፡ ከብርና ከፍ ያለ ገዢ የሚ
 ሰጠው አሰከ ዛሬ ለቀለም ጥምርት ነው፡፡ በባህላችን
 ቀለም ለቀረ ሰው ከአጅ ሠራተኛና ከገበሬ የበለጠ ይረዳ
 ሠጥታል፡፡⁴⁶

Nevertheless those who were brought up in the modern type of school with a scorn for what was indigenous began to realize later that they maintained mistaken views of the native practice of life. Eventually, they felt they should create progressive values by blending harmless elements both from native tradition and Western civilization. However, they were not sure whether the new values they wanted to create would be accepted by the society of which they were a part. It was difficult to sort out those elements which were to be

⁴⁶The Ethiopian Educational Philosophy, p. 52

-In our culture, intellectual training and manual labour have been separated from each other for a long time, and the former did not contribute much to the development of the latter. Honour and high esteem have been accorded more to intellectual training than to manual labour. Our culture has given a higher status for the intellectual rather than for the craftsman or the peasant. [Trans. by the researcher]

discarded and those which were to be maintained. Moreover, it was essential that they paid in kind for the traditional values which they thought they must break away from. Above all, they had to withstand the challenge they faced from the old generation. The old generation challenged them because its peace was upset by the state of change where the Ethiopia of the distant past was transforming into a new Ethiopia. This lack of understanding of the state of transition in the old generation caused a conflict between long-established traditional values and the innovations brought from foreign civilizations by the educated group.

The progressive . . . want the government to increase the functional and geographic scope of its activities. The traditionalists want it to preserve the status quo, and oppose the growth and diversification of its functions.⁴⁷

It is also well worth noting what Workaferahu Kebede says regarding the conflict between the young and the old on the question of a marriage feast:

In those days even a poor man had to forego everything in favour of preparing the feast just to witness the joy of his son or daughter when he or she left him to start a new life. Some went to the extent of selling their estates, borrowing money from friends to rent a big villa and to prepare a grand feast that cost a lifetime to pay for. Not only had parents borrowed, but there were also men who married wives and remained paying their wedding debts even after they became fathers of several children. It was in opposition to such a ruinous marriage practice that youngsters indulged themselves in a simple system that gave a culture shock to the old. There was incrimination of the young by the old, and vice versa. Youngsters who survived on meagre monthly incomes considered such feasts as sheer madness, while the old accused them of disrespect for tradition.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ George A. Lipsky, Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society Its Culture (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1962), p. 325.

⁴⁸ "Modern Patterns of Marriage", Addis Reporter II (February, 1970), p. 13.

Those who realized their pathetic situation therefore suggested practical solutions through writing. They showed that a complete aberration from or a servile adherence to tradition was not suited to the development of our country and its people. Menghistu was one of those intellectuals who reiterated this suggestion in his poetic and dramatic works. To convey his message to the general public, he depicted both tradition-bound and liberated characters. By doing so, he showed the conflict of the old and the new ways of life; and thereby indicated what came out of that conflict.

The young educated Ethiopians who were so anxious to bring about a harmonious cross-breeding of native culture and imported civilization were affected by the profound clash of opinions between the old and the new, because they were the ones who took the initiative to bring about the desired change. The task of discarding the decadent elements from the native culture without rejecting all that made up the richness of the Ethiopian tradition and incorporating from the Western tradition all that was valid and pertinent to the Ethiopian environment was difficult and challenging.

In addition to that, intellectuals constituted an incipient class of their own, because of their education and their way of thinking; elements that have isolated them from the traditional masses. The members of this class

. . . share a style of life that is, if not quite Western, quite distinct from that of their traditionally oriented compatriots. From a passionate attachment to Western-style clothing . . . to the acceptance of modern social and political values and technological skills and methods, this group is set apart from the masses whose life still follows the traditional rhythm.⁴⁹

Their isolation made them unfamiliar with the style of life of the masses. The chance that their concocted values

⁴⁹ Markakis, p. 184.

would be accepted by the traditional society was slim. Whatever the case, there was the urge in these wishful intellectuals to bring about the desired change, because they were pressured by what they saw in foreign civilizations. They "admire many foreign things and want to bring foreign ideas and institutions to their country".⁵⁰ They felt that there was no group who could play the leading role in this endeavour other than themselves. Therefore, they ventured to engage themselves in the arduous struggle for modernization and betterment. But pathetically enough, they are truly described thus:

Socially and professionally, the position of the educated group . . . at this early stage of development . . . is affected by the lack of clear definition of role, an essential to its meaningful functioning in society.⁵¹

There was also a clear division in outlook between the young and educated class of people - making the situation more complicated.

The generation gap, a differential position separating the older from the younger generation, deeply divided and weakened this group as a whole. In the eyes of the younger Ethiopians, the older educated men who are now in position of power are among the obstacles that must be dislodged if Ethiopia is to move rapidly towards modernization.⁵²

Lost in theorizing, many of the young intellectuals remained in a state of doubt and indecision whether to employ the methods dictated to them by their reason and education or to continue using traditional procedures to solve public and private problems.

When Menghistu witnessed this state of indecision in the educated young, he prefaced one of his plays, Marriage by Abduction, with a poem entitled ዓወገጃ ልጅ ያለህ (Ye who are men),

⁵⁰Lipsky, p. 325.

⁵¹Markakis, pp. 189-190.

⁵²Ibid., p. 191.

did when young; by the traditional struggle of a girl to escape the grip of her abductors; by the arrival of the girl's father and his exaggerated anger about the affair as contrasted with the untold fear of the team of bachelors; by the intervention of the patriotic Fitawrari to cool down the blazing father; by the sudden resolution of the girl to marry her abductor and the dejection of her father. The imaginative and creative playwright, Menghistu, has created all these dramatic situations to hold our interest to the last minute. He has magnified the truth of this age-old practice of marriage, namely by abduction. The tone that he has given to this common practice of marriage is a seriously-contrived truth with a comic flavour, by drawing the scenes from experience and writing them with ease to offer pleasure to audience or readers. His rich artistic talent has enabled him to give prominence to what could be considered trivial under normal circumstances.

The underlying theme of this play concerns the preservation of a traditional ideal in a changing society. It seems likely that Menghistu entertains the notion that abduction is a traditional practice which must be preserved because of its potential to be used as a solution to the problem of marriage from which the younger generation suffers. In the character of Merine Tekwas, Menghistu sheds crocodile's tears concerning the sad situation in which the Negadras finds himself. Merine Tekwas sympathizes with Workineh Birru, but at the same time encourages him to swallow the hard truth of what has apparently happened to his daughter. This is clearly discernible from the portrayal of the Negadras, who at last leaves his daughter half-heartedly to her kidnapper.

Marriage by Abduction seems to be in line with Restoration Drama: marriage was a favourite topic for Restoration dramatists, and it was the main butt of their satire. To understand the

similarity between Menghistu's attachment to marriage and that of the Restoration Dramatists, it is necessary to go back in time and consider what marriage involved in those days in England and compare it with marriage today in Ethiopia.

Until very recently, as in seventeenth century England, marriage in our country was not a private matter between two individuals. In fact, it is not yet the concern of the would-be wife and husband in most parts of Ethiopia. As a matter of fact, matches were arranged by fathers: fixing dowries and jointures were first considered before the two married.

But there came a time, that is, in the 1960's, when the wishes of those about to be married could not be ignored. What happened usually was that the role of the family group took second place, while that of the individuals took first. Workaferahu in Modern Patterns of Marriage records:

Towards the end of the 1960's and the beginning of 1970, there started a new pattern of marriage in the capital, the initiative taken by the so-called educated class. They announced that their wedding ceremony took place at the Municipality's registrar's office in the presence of a few people to witness the wedding of the couple.⁵⁴

So it was at such a time of changing circumstances that Menghistu wrote his plays on marriage to expose society, as Bernard Shaw did. His method is also similar to Shaw's. The influence of Shaw's play Man and Superman deserves critical attention. Like Tanner, Bezabih becomes a victim in the hands of a woman.

Over and above this, Menghistu breaks the conventional methods of the institution of marriage by reiterating the comic element of the wife-hunting theme. The underlying hilarity with which the theme of marriage is treated by the author makes the readers look at marriage from an unconventional

⁵⁴ Ibid.

point of view. All these unconventional responses that the characters present in Marriage by Abduction makes the dramatist's knowledge of the society strike us as that of an ironic and sardonically humorous observer philosophizing on the pleasant though seemingly implausible surprises that life has to offer.

As in the plays of Ibsen, the action of this play is kept to the bare minimum, and the characters are literally confined to one dramatic setting in which they confront each other. Further, in this confrontation, we find the individuals trying to realize the various potentialities of life, each in his own way.

Such psychological exploration of characters makes the viewers or readers conscious of the various facets of human behaviour, and, against these varieties of human response, the central theme of the play, the contrast between the traditional and the modern points of view towards life, is projected.

When we turn our attention to his second play, Marriage of Unequals, we realize that Menghistu continues to idolize in an pronounced manner those fearless, practical young men. In this play, Menghistu also identifies wholeheartedly with Bahru, the reformer. In order to bring out his sharp satire against the reactionary feudal society, he uses polished humour and sharp witticism. Moreover, using marriage as a vehicle, Menghistu gives a deadly blow to the social etiquette and feudal norms that have fettered members of the society. To accomplish this, Menghistu uses his artistic and linguistic talents which have added strength to his light satire.

Though the themes - the need for shattering feudal chauvinism, the battering down of archaic traditions, long cherished by the feudal class and the reinstituting of marriage on equal basis - are to some extent a continuation of the themes dealt with in Marriage by Abduction: they offer an opportunity for readers or spectators to scrutinize feudal prejudices.

Though reformist in intention and weak in strength, the attack on these feudal values is an indication of the rise of a new hope and a bright future for those who lived in extreme subjugation. Moreover, from the point of view of the oppressed, the attack was one step forward towards the recognition and actualization of their civil status.

In his attempt to bring out his theme, Menghistu enlightens his audience about the clash between modern and traditional ideas, first in his stage directions and then in the dialogue of the characters. In the first stage direction, for example, he makes us meet Bahru, a high-born protagonist, and thoroughly educated man with Peletie, an illiterate countryside woman, in a country setting in a tukul, where traditional and modern furniture is put together, perhaps to suggest the symbolism of conflict or the inherent contradiction between old and new.

Bahru's tukul, typical of one of the group of houses in the country, is equipped with both traditional furniture such as the Berchuma (stool) and the Medeb (earthen seat built against a wall) and modern items such as a book-case, a writing-table, a wash-stand, and a portable blackboard. The traditional articles, still used as in the past, appear to take no notice of the presence of the modern ones. The modern ones, in turn, seem to assert that they have come to oust the traditional ones. However, which ones will win at last is not known for the time being. They are simply confronting each other. Put in the same tukul, they suggest an initial harmony. Nevertheless, as the action of the play moves, due to the inherent contradiction of things as well as of people's attitudes, the conflict between the old and the new slowly emerges.

The conflict between Lady Alganesh and Bahru ensues step by step. As an agent of change, Bahru is not brought to and imposed upon the villagers, but he is integrated tactfully in just the same way as the proverb suggests: When in Rome,

do as the Romans do. The villagers were neither let down by the absence of up-to-date articles nor wonderstruck by the modernization when they entered his tukul. They were rather consoled by the balance of old and new articles maintained in the house. The balance also suggests one of the vital themes of the play: taking the good elements of both traditional and Western customs to create a new way of life.

The blend of the new and the old is suggested in the construction of the tukul itself. The touch of modernism in the tukul is that it has windows, a salon and a bedroom, unlike the usual tukuls. At the same time, it symbolizes the future tukuls in countryside Ethiopia. Generally speaking, the tukul and its contents, together with Bahru's attitude, suggest that there is a promising future for most people.

As we stop and think about the serious purpose of a comic drama, we realize that even what is given in the stage directions is meaningful and instructive to readers. If the stage directions of a play are purposeful and instructive, then its content must convey a great deal to readers. Indeed, that is what happens in this serious comedy.

As we probe into the first scene of this comedy, we are reminded of a common phenomenon in the countryside. We meet a maid-servant beating "Abish", a renowned breakfast dessert, while her master is still dozing in bed. The situation in which we see an educated young man and pretty but uneducated young maid-servant is a common event in the countryside. When teachers are working out in the country, they are compelled by necessity to employ a dual-purpose maid-servant, without whom life would be unbearable. The relationship that these characters have is typical of a relationship that exists between a teacher and his servant in the country side. The language they use suggests warmth and closeness. According to tradition, a servant allowed into her master's bed feels raised in status. She therefore starts to knit her eyebrows

and sees with half an eye when ordered to do certain chores. Likewise, Beletie assumes that she is a real wife and answers Bahru's call coolly, unlike a subdued maiden. Over and above, she exchanges with Bahru tirades and witty retorts, coated with light humour. This witty and humorous atmosphere makes the play entertaining. But the purpose of depicting such an event may be to agitate the audience to fight against the practice of exploiting maid-servants by educated bachelors. The playwright seems to emphasize the point that, if servants are capable of doing what legal wives can do, there is no reason why they should not be recognized as legal wives. If they are servants proper, they are hired to give service in house management which they execute from dawn to dusk, and they should not be interfered with for other services for which they are not remunerated, such as filling a gap left unfilled by a legally married wife.

But Menghistu suggests how this social error could be corrected by making Beletie have her marital status. He raised the issue and gave the solution himself after having laughed at the practice derisively. Nevertheless, Menghistu has not accorded Beletie her marital status just because she is beautiful, quick-minded and capable of being literate, but because she is as good as any other woman. Before Bahru declares Beletie to be his wife, he is scornfully laughed at by the author for his infatuation with the foreign habit of an early morning kiss.

The fact that those who went abroad often fell victim to everything foreign was very much discussed earlier, especially when this play was written. So, in order to curb the plastic mind of these people, Menghistu wrote this play. His effort has helped a lot, even to the extent that we do not find so many "Ethiopian ferenjis" today in the country. Many people seem to have realized that it is no use appearing as "black ferenjis", because they lose their identity.

Menghistu, one of those who were thoroughly educated outside Ethiopia, but who had never been alienated from his indigenous culture, is for creating an entirely new culture, amalgamating what is good in our tradition with what is also good in Western culture. Therefore, a complete deviation seems to be intolerable to him. He likes Bahru's attitude towards human beings, which this character has acquired because of his Western education. On the other hand, he disapproves of those fruitless Western practices that have little or no relevance to the material life of our people. But he does not condemn love at all, though he may not support gamboling with one's maid-servant in the early morning.

Here we observe that Menghistu is indeed adroit in using his dramatic talent; even more in making comedy serve a purpose. To a superficial observer, the witticism and humour that one hears or reads have nothing significant except to elicit entertainment. But to a discerning person everything that each character says, whether in the form of fun or seriousness, has a meaning of its own either for the listener or the reader.

Moreover, he is ingenious in turning the attention of his audience from a very common romantic situation to a high-toned subject. Without much fidgeting for ways and means, Menghistu links the romantic situation with another stern situation; that is, the romantic gambolling of Bahru and Beletie is linked with the coming of Lady Alganesh, the symbol of the landed gentry, who commands fear and respect from great and small alike. He laughed at Bahru amiably and now he laughs at Lady Alganesh scornfully. He laughs at her nominal reason for coming to Harar, that is, in the name of kissing St. Gabriel's Shrine (as it is said in Amharic); but in the main, she comes to terrorize and subjugate her tenants. It was customary that the feudal aristocrats were paid homage by their tenants. This dramatic event is very well depicted in Haddis Alemayehu's Amharic novel Fikir Iskemekabir (Love Unto the Grave). Here

also Menghistu makes the event clear to us by informing us that there was a long retinue of peasants waiting to pay tribute to Lady Alganesh. The feudal aristocrats demanded this tribute very strongly, because it was an assurance of the fact that they were still held in high honour and reverence. To complement this, the aristocrats on their part used to call tenants to a grand feast in order to assure the tenants that they still had family feelings with them. In this, the bond that existed between the two parties was strengthened.

However, in Marriage of Unequals, we find Bahru expressing his contempt towards this traditional practice when he sees a huge crowd waiting to pay tribute to Lady Alganesh. "Why can't she peacefully put (stay) in Addis Ababa? Now she is here, the whole village is in turmoil,"⁵⁵ growls Bahru when he witnesses the homage procession. This is a simple expression of disapproval of this practice, of course. But the disapproval does not suggest an act of opposition to the required tribute. Bahru simply sympathizes with the villagers. If he were an agent of profound change for the mental as well as the material existence of the people he would agitate them to oppose the status quo and struggle for their emancipation. Owing to his lack of revolutionary zeal, Bahru remains weak and fruitless in his mission to work against the reactionary feudal values. We do not see much change brought about through his efforts. As a matter of fact, we do not observe any series of comic disasters in the play that will finally free the traditional villagers from their mistaken views of life.

Bahru limited himself to teaching the people the alphabet and a few things about modern thinking with regard to earth science. Nevertheless, there could be a basic excuse that can be given to justify the absence of political activities other than this limited subject range. The purpose of this play is to compel the feudal class to restore reason in order to

⁵⁵Marriage of Unequals, p. 3.

ascertain equality, liberty, justice and democracy for all. In order to accomplish this objective, the situation was not conducive for using direct satire to expose reaction and decadence. It was more than sufficient to use subtle satire to attain his goal of social criticism in accordance with the order of things in those days. Therefore, Menghistu is not to blame if he has painted Bahru or Beletie as passive accepters of the order of the day. Furthermore, the greatest task that a subtle satire can accomplish is to expose the absurdities of certain norms or values in an ironic manner with a view to correcting them in due time.

Menghistu has reflected the life and ethics of the feudal community, without the savagery of Swift's satire. Satire, according to Menghistu, makes men conscious of their follies and hypocrisies; thereby prodding them to re-evaluate themselves.

Hence, Menghistu contented himself with the transmission of the principal function of comedy, which he thinks is beyond amusement and relaxation. He feels he has fulfilled a social duty under the prevailing censorious and coercive state apparatus. The main function of comedy, indeed, exceeds that of mere entertainment. Instead, it becomes a means to express public opinion on any given situation. The roar of laughter at a particular revelation of comic behaviour or comedy as a form of entertainment plays an important role in a society as a source of sane ethical values and as a creator of social integrity.

So, by writing this satirical comedy, Menghistu has attempted to arrive at an objective appraisal of the feudal order by probing into its social and material conditions. He sought concrete evidence for his appraisal of the feudal society by referring to the day-to-day life of the feudal and peasant classes.

The Ethiopian society is said to be divided into two major classes: the working class and the feudal aristocratic class. The latter, a non-productive class, imposes itself upon the former, the productive one, and yet many of the aristocratic class despise and disintegrate the cohesion of the working class in order to perpetuate its dominance. This is the class that Menghistu attacks with his scathing criticism for its prejudicial attitudes in order to prick the conscience of its members, and to correct their mistaken views and values.

Menghistu may have felt that, if a play attacked only native customs, it could not hope to find a positive response among the masses. Besides, most of the Ethiopian public are illiterate, and directness in method of criticism cannot be called for. Initially only a certain category of Ethiopians, those nourished by Western culture, could attend the performance. Therefore, subtle satire can achieve its purpose among the few educated - lucky ones who are believed to be the prime movers of the oppressed class, so that the latter may fight for its freedom.

Indeed, this play was not written for the masses, because they did not have access to the theatre. First, the number of theatres was not sufficient to provide for the masses. Second, even if theatres had been available everywhere, the masses would have not been able to buy a seat. At the time when this play was performed, for example, tickets were priced not less than one birr, which was the equivalent of from one to two days' labour for an unskilled, able-bodied male. Therefore, the average socio-economic level of those who used to frequent the theatres could roughly be called middle-class.

Not only were economic factors a barrier to frequenting theatres, but in most people there was a lack of interest. Surprisingly enough, a sprinkling of the upper-class nobility and officials, who actually had the means, used to go to the theatre. From this we can infer that play-going was a modern

phenomenon, and that only those who received modern ideas went to the theatre. But it should not be forgotten that, when playwrights from the ruling circle put on plays, the nobility were invited to marvel at the refinement of the moralizing.

It is to be remembered also that people used to be invited to play performances at school on certain occasions. But to think that they would understand the message of such high-purposed plays as Marriage of Unequals would hardly be believable. When they were invited to school plays, for example, they reacted spontaneously in the traditional "silent language": they covered their mouths often with the toga when embarrassed, but there was little inhibition of laughing, or even of weeping. The school theatre created a great understanding between the native population and the students. Within the limits of their potential, the students did much to bring about the spirit of modernization in rural Ethiopia. It is presumable that the country public came out of the school halls with some austere and profound moral messages.

Whatever the case may be, plays written until very recently were meant for the rising generation of the educated group to a greater degree and to the feudal circle to a lesser extent. Thus Menghistu need not be seen as unique among other dramatists in that both of his plays were written for the educated and feudal circle and its lackeys, in order to remind them of their follies and make them take appropriate measures to cut out these follies before they brought about their downfall.

Menghistu's parody does not restrict itself to attacking the hypocrisies mercilessly, but it also does justice to obnoxious practices such as sorcery and superstition. In this regard, Lady Alganesh serves him delightfully to mock at the social behaviour of the feudal class. In addition to that, by treating the two characters Ayya Lizibu and Aba Mimmito

satirically, Menghistu makes his readers or spectators conscious of the way in which sorcery and superstition can condition the provincial society.

When we dwell on what these impostors are doing, we become aware of the fact that Menghistu is very interested in breaking through the conditioned practices of the Ethiopian society that have become outdated and worthless. However, his satire is not as harsh as Swift's, because, unlike the readers of Gulliver's Travels, we are not made conscious of any fundamental irredeemable degeneration in his play. At best, he makes fun out of the jaded cultural elements of feudal Ethiopia. To say the worst, he is exposing the glaring defects of the Ethiopian feudal society.

In order to protest against the fossilised conventions of the society, Menghistu creates an angry young man. This man seeks shelter in the provincial setting to attack these reactionary conventions which have fettered the common man. Bahru, the angry young man, is a social reformer who understands that betterment is possible only through proper education. The provincial setting, which had still not been touched by the reforming hands of a satirist, is the foundation on which Menghistu builds his social criticism; a criticism handled with pleasant witticism and humour.

As in Restoration Comedy, Marriage of Unequals has an intrigue, and the main interest is focussed on the way in which the protagonist is going to succeed. In addition, Lady Alganesh reminds us of Lady Wishfort, and the Hadji and Aleka make up the complementary characters very much reminiscent of Restoration Comedy characters.

Generally speaking, Marriage of Unequals is pervaded with bitter concepts regarding feudal norms, and perhaps a feudal society could not have easily accepted it. When, for example, the marriage of the two unequals is accepted in that

play, it means a challenge is thrown at the conventions of a fixed, tradition-bound hierarchy. This challenge is a comic punishment for the members of the feudal class which has helped the writer to bring out the contrast between modern and traditional modes of thinking. To a modern person, man is man, and there is no use making distinctions on the merit of family lineage. Nevertheless, to the traditionalist who strongly believes in the view that God has predestined man's life, and that therefore some are fated to become masters and others servants, the idea of equality is nonsense. The division is an unshakable law of the universe that everybody has to abide by. Whatever the case, these two opposing forces, modern and traditional views, constantly clash, personalized in Bahru and Lady Alganesh respectively.

The theme that has been dealt with in Marriage by Abduction is the lack of manliness in the educated youth, who, as a result of their education, have become indecisive in the face of a crucial problem. It seems that the author is of the opinion that modern education makes a man half-hearted, thereby debilitating him to become unduly slow in taking action.

In traditional Ethiopia, a bachelor abducted a girl either by force or by agreement from a convenient place, when he wanted to marry without paying a dowry. When the abduction was carried out by force, the bachelor and his companions planned it carefully so that neither the girl nor any member of her family would suspect. They lurked in a place where the girl fetched water, or gathered fire-wood, or passed on her way to a relative's house, and grabbed her and ran away. But when the event took place by agreement, she simply availed herself of an opportunity and eloped with him.

Whichever way it was done, the day after the abduction some elders and the best man were sent to the girl's parents to effect a reconciliation. These delegates earnestly apologized

to the parents and admitted the mistake the abductor had committed. Her parents, on their part, would pretend that they had been looked down upon and their honour trampled on. However, after a few minutes' negotiations, they would give in, express regret and subsequently declare that they recognized the marriage. But this is true only when the girl's parents felt that their son-in-law was compatible with their daughter in pedigree and wealth. This is the background on which Menghistu constructs his comic play, Marriage by Abduction.

What happens in this play is that the girl, Tafessech, as the name itself implies, is abducted, and later her father, Negadras Workineh Birru, discovers that she is hidden in a house outside Addis Ababa. He then appears at the country villa where she is held and, after causing a great deal of terror to the abductors, he refuses to believe in her purity even when she tells him that she is still chaste. Failing to convince her father, she decides to marry Bezabih.

This is a decision that not only her traditionalist father is ashamed of, but also the audience may become embarrassed at. However, it is at this point that we observe a glaring contrast between the old and the new way of thinking. The modern thinking embodied in Tafessech seems flimsy, because her action lacks serious consideration of the matter. This is nothing but a subtle insult that the dramatist is aiming at the educated young women of the time, whom he thinks were hasty and thoughtless. But unlike the women, the men are accused of undue meditation over simple matters of life. In fact, what we realize is that Tafessech is a complete contrast to Bezabih, because she is very quick, while he is very slow, in taking action.

Another contrast that we find in this play is the arguments that Gelaglie and Bezabih pursue. There is an arduous struggle between the two parties, each trying to appear

reasonable in his own way. The author undoubtedly supports the view pursued by Bezabih and company, because he has depicted Ge Gelaglie as foolish and unduly fearful. Gelaglie becomes timid when he sees Tafessech at home. He then condemns abduction, but fails to give an alternate solution to the problem of how to find a wife. But, on the other hand, the writer appreciates Bezabih for all that he did. No doubt Bezabih's position is flimsy too, because it is tilted towards adventurism. It is adventurism because Bezabih and his coterie advocate abduction without thinking out prior arrangements, which is untraditional. Despite their education, they overlook the need for the occurrence of love before marriage. They are no better than Lady Alganesh, who considers love as the "husk" of marriage. Bezabih feels that it is enough if the girl is just a woman. However, no educated man with all his senses would say this when it comes to choosing a marriage partner. As a matter of fact, educated men strove hard to get enviable wives in those days when the traditionalists contented themselves with tolerable ones. One may say that Menghistu is lashing the educated youth in an ironical manner, because such modernity as abducting an unknown girl from the street is traditionally unconventional. If we look at what happened in traditional Ethiopia, we find that, when an educated man fell in love with a girl, he sent a love note to her through a kiosk-keeper or through a girl friend of hers or through an old woman, asking her to marry him. If the girl consented to the proposal, she often absented herself from her home on lame excuses in order to find whether he was a good man to marry. Finally, if they were suited to each other, they told their families and were married when approved.

Therefore, Tafessech's abduction is not similar to the traditional one but may be considered as a slightly modified type. Otherwise, the custom of abduction, which was always disapproved of, is not at all depicted rightly. Moreover, an essential element of abduction is skipped. In a situation

where abduction is committed, elders are sent to negotiate with the girl's parents in order to restore peace between the parents and the abductor. Had the play ended in this way, it would have been appropriate, but the way it is made to end is unlikely.

Nevertheless, we may leave the inappropriateness of the ending aside and put stress on the intention of criticism. On the basis of wishful thinking to blend the good elements of tradition and modernism, Bezabih and his accomplices fail to take the right amount from each culture, and therefore they are laughed at by the dramatist for their naive attempt.

The other side of the matter is that Menghistu is pointing out to his audience the fact that abduction has long been known in our country, although always taken as a disappointing system of marriage, particularly to fathers and mothers whose daughters were either beautiful or renowned for lineage. Furthermore, he is hinting at the value of abduction in the solution of a contemporary social problem of marriage.

To indicate that it has a long history, Menghistu has depicted the abduction of Wondayehu's mother. This former event is compared with the abduction of Tafessech, which is so deliberately done that what happens to this girl cannot be surprising either to the old or to the young. Indeed, it is a rehash of what used to happen in the past.

On the other hand, in Marriage of Unequals, the representative of the feudal aristocrats, Lady Alganesh, boasts that she is of good lineage, and that she was married to a member of a "good race"; and therefore she does not want her nephew to marry a debased woman whose origins are unknown. Lady Alganesh is practical in that she is not content with criticizing the marriage of unequals, but suggests that Bahru should marry a "better" girl from the same feudal group.

Menghistu, no doubt, pouts his lips at her snobbery. The adherence to class marriage is, he feels, a matter of the past, which is thrown in the storage-bin of history.

In this play, more than in the other, Menghistu had shown vividly the uselessness of maintaining traditional beliefs and practices in the Ethiopian marriage custom, because this is a matter of the past which must give way to a new marriage system. Unfortunately, this implicit meaning may not be discernible to all, due to the subtlety of his criticism. The failure to understand the message of the play by those who tried to comment on the performance is indicated in the introductory section of the printed play. Most of the commentators misunderstood the theme, and some made mistaken interpretations. However, there were some commentators who gave a more or less accurate comment regarding its message. These were literary-minded people, as is rightly indicated by the author.

By contrast, Marriage by Abduction did not receive comments from readers or viewers. Had it been commented upon, people would have been deceived by the profusion of fun, and would therefore have failed to note the underlying message. As it is full of humour and witticism, this play might have worsened the situation of those in the audience who were not sufficiently literary-minded to understand the deep-seated meaning.

As both of these plays have been translated into English, it is presumed that all kinds of people who know the language both at home and abroad may read them and get ample information about the concepts and practices of Ethiopian marriage from a writer who has a deep understanding of both modern and traditional ways of life. Lady Alganesh and her tenants, Fetawrari Merine Tekwas and Negadras Workineh Birru, the Hadji and Aleka, Ayya Lizibu and Aba Mimito, the adventurist youngsters and their

victim, are very well-drawn social types whom Menghistu has used to show the sharp contrast between the old and the new.

These plays may be read in the future as the relics of the years before the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974. Particularly Marriage of Unequals would be read for its genuine depiction of Feudal Ethiopia, and for its heart-felt suggestion, by the author, for a change of heart in mankind. It might even become a classic for its high merit in the tacit presentation of social criticism.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In the years before the emergence of socio-drama, plays aimed at reflecting religious feelings, stressing for the most part orthodox views. In spite of the individualization of dramatic expression, the portrayal of vices, follies and the condemnation of worldliness remained the major themes of most of the dramatic works of contemporary playwrights.

But this writer does not imply that there were no plays written with an aim to agitate people to rise in defence of their country from invaders. There were. Yoftahe's Afajeshign can at least be cited as an example of this. This play was written just before the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. Many others of like intent may have been written, but this is the only play whose script is available today. However, what this researcher is trying to generalize upon is that the bulk of what had been produced in the form of drama before the 1950's does not reflect social criticism in favour of the masses. But, in the years that followed, the theatre aimed at using drama as an instrument of protest against absurd attitudes and practices.

This study throws light on the sound dramatic developments that have been seen in the post-war period. One of the significant strides that dramatic developments made is that new curricula have been drafted to train high-level professionals in one of the country's higher education institutions.

The contextual analyses of the two dramatic pieces of Menghistu Lemma are hoped to have proved to some extent Menghistu's enviable power to provoke theatre-goers to reflecting. Those who are used to Menghistu are always waiting for him to say something lively but also often cutting to the bone.

Further, Menghistu is unbeatable in his ability as an entertainer: he has the capacity to put across important ideas in brilliant and powerful terms. Most of all, Menghistu has an undrying spring of humour and gaiety which stimulates an audience to laugh and think at the same time.

As one critic put it, "Menghistu is the Bernard Shaw of Ethiopia." Though he is not such a giant as Shaw, he has similarities with the Irish wit. Just like Shaw, Menghistu does not preach boring sermons nor does he tell his audience to think in a prescribed manner nor does he deliver lectures in his plays. Instead, he indirectly compels them to think.

As a dramatist, Menghistu has created a number of characters whose opinions differ, and therefore they clash. In Marriage by Abduction and Marriage of Unequals, we have observed the conflict of ideas and beliefs personified in the chief characters. By contemplating opposing views, we are made to think for ourselves and arrive at our own conclusions.

The influence of the Morality plays in the way in which the names of the characters are used show significantly their individual characteristics. Moreover, the similar technique used by Restoration Comedy of making characters stand for representative qualities indicated by their names has also been used by this playwright. In this way, it becomes clear that, underlying the conflict of individuals, characteristics are represented by them. It is not only a battle of individuals, but also a battle of attitudes to life that they represent.

Though Menghistu has not created characters comparable to the characters portrayed by Shaw, some of them are immortal figures in Ethiopian dramatic literature. Who would forget the nostalgic Fitawrari of Marriage by Abduction, who, time and time again, tries to bring into significance the good times he and his like enjoyed before the introduction of Western civilization into Ethiopia? Would not Lady Alganesh

leave a lasting impression in the minds of readers or spectators as the embodiment of a feudal social order?

Of all the comic writers that Ethiopia has thus far produced, Menghistu is the most successful playwright in making comedy instructive and corrective. In other words, Menghistu has proved successful in making his plays tell exactly what is wrong with their viewers. Moreover, in the two plays under consideration, we see a literary attempt in dramatic form in which characters, situation, plots and beginnings and endings are presented. In doing this, we can say that Menghistu is Ethiopia's first comic writer. We also observe that he shows an enviable power of manipulating words and subtle language suited to stage performance. Other comic writers, as defined by the prominent stage-director, Abate Mekuria, are "accidental entertainers". This researcher entertains the view that the so-called "accidental entertainers" may have imitated his commendable quality of constructing a plot, because Menghistu has his own way of showing even the smallest detail in plot construction. His comedies show combined incidents which could have been enough for two separate plays. But, creative and artistic a playwright that he is, Menghistu has fused the separate strands of action so that they seem related aspects of a single issue.

The plot in Marriage by Abduction is plausible, even though some of the incidents would be highly unlikely in real life. In spite of its seemingly slight plot, this play is remarkable for the battle of ideas, individuals, philosophical points of view and the variety of suspense with which the characters unfold. As the play progresses, readers are given newer responses to life, and each new turn of the play has a fresh insight to offer on life and human behaviour.

On the other hand, the plot in Marriage of Unequals is satisfactory from the point of view of cause and effect and

plausibility. The various strands of action are related to one another; thereby making the play a complete work.

Among other things, these two plays have shown that educated Ethiopians in the 1960's were interested in bringing about changes in all walks of life, particularly in the sphere of marriage. They dealt with contemporary marriage and its complications that have resulted from a clash of attitudes and prejudices. Generally speaking, their themes are about the conflict between the old and the new ways of looking at life. They acquaint us with the network of feudal culture, bound by superstition, lack of education and a generation gap. However, as we come close to the end of these plays, we become aware of certain changes in the whole setting.

Not only does Menghistu make us aware of the problems, but he also hints at solutions for us. The plays, therefore, are not a condemnation of humanity or the feudal society which one finds in Gulliver's Travels. It is rather a pleasant exposure of the contradictions and limitations of a growing society. In his exposé, the playwright uses plenty of wit and humour to make his satirical observations pertinent and delightful.

In his social criticism, Menghistu unmask the social pretensions of the leisured rich and the indecisiveness and irresoluteness of the incipient class of educated men of the same society. He attacks both of these groups with wonderful clarity and a sense of ease by wielding his weapons: words and contrived expressions, and internally wounding epigrams.

The dialogue, though it suggests colloquial speech for the most part, is designed like quite ordinary conversation. Crammed with imagery, witty expressions, similes and metaphors, it is designed to serve as an indirect commentary to help the audience understand the message intended. Menghistu's unique and enviable capability as a writer is that he never writes anything unintelligible to his audience.

Menghistu has many salient features both as a man and a playwright. However, he has one outstanding quality: the quality of being an embryo actor, which makes him more lively than anybody else in whatever situation he finds himself.

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A P P E N D I X

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT,

MENGHISTU LEMMA

Q. There is no comic writer in the proper sense of the term in our country, and even more, no satirist. Ato Menghistu, would that be a right remark?

A. We cannot say that there are no satirists in our country. There are. What about Menghistu Gedamu? Is he not a satirist? He is a satirist whose method of writing bears the stamp of caricature like the work of Jonathan Swift, though Menghistu's has not reached a high level. He has written satirical works such as Meselal (The Ladder), and Yamsaleka Gebrie (Sergeant Gebrie). Alemayehu Moges is another satirist. So we cannot rule out satirical writing from our literary heritage.

I for one do not say I write high comedy. By high comedy I mean comedy with a serious purpose. I do not give a caricature of characters or situations by exaggeration. Satire has an element of caricature, but none of my works has an element of exaggeration. I say I am a realist because I do not deal in fantasy. I write social criticism. My characters are not the embodiment of good or evil. They are ordinary characters in everyday life. Take Bahru, for instance. He is an idealist who brought with him the ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty from a foreign land. He was a one-man Peace Corps, but one who came home from abroad to work in rural Ethiopia.

The prime objective of my comedy is not to incite laughter. I have been influenced in comedy by Molière, Shaw and Gogol. These are my masters as far as technique is concerned. The rest is my own.

Q. From my reading of your two plays, I have noticed that you have used marriage as an instrument to lay bare archaic tradition in feudal Ethiopia. What wheedled you

into using marriage as a vehicle to achieve your goal; that is, to attack wrong feudal notions?

- A. I had a democratic and reformist sentiment. I was urged from within to criticise social evils, and I wrote these comedies.

A writer starts to write a story with no calculations. There is no planning in the conception of a creative work. There is inspiration, the result of which is the writing of a story. It simply comes to one's mind. Yes, the subject matter of two of my comedies is marriage, but that is not the theme. I did not think of writing on marriage. Any creative tendency catches you all of a sudden.

As soon as I came from abroad, there was the idea of marriage, and the need to marry. In those days, there were such questions as marrying for money, position, or love.

Some people valued money or position and some of us were for love. Those who stood for love were daring men, revolutionaries imbued with democratic sentiments; they were the pioneers of true modern marriage. Bahru is their representative.

The subject matter in Marriage of Unequals is marriage, but the theme is the transformation of society as a result of the conflict between the old and the new. Apart from any gift I may have for comedy, I was compelled by circumstance to write comic drama. It was not politically good form to write tragic plays in those days. Tragedy was considered as an agent of popular embitterment, and was therefore more readily suppressed. But with the same message, comedy was more easily accepted, for it was regarded as a tranquilizer. Therefore, I thought I should write comedy to give an outlet to my social criticism.

Some of those who returned from England wanted change, since they were social democrats. There was also controversy about marriage. Some wanted an educated wife, and others preferred an illiterate, traditional one. Those of us who wanted an uneducated wife felt that the educated one was too free in everything. If you study the characters in my plays there is always a protagonist who does the unconventional.

Q. Critics say that plays written before you began writing were moralistic and historical in intention. But when you and Ato Tsegaye Gebre Medhin started dramatic writing, social criticism was introduced. What prompted you to deviate from what was conventional? Could you say that your predecessors such as Makonnen Endalkachew, Kebede Michael and Girmachew Tekle Hawariat did not set an example for you?

A. Though some of them were French-educated, my predecessors were mainly of the pre-war generation. In addition to that, their class background was different from mine. Therefore, they had little chance to influence me through their ideas. Moreover, they were incapable of writing radical social criticism, because they were members of the ruling class. Therefore, they wrote moralistic plays in order to support the existing order.

S Secondly, they were not much exposed to world literature, and therefore they were not modern in outlook or technique. They were tradition-bound for the most part.

They used the vernacular, but with a touch of Geez; they were not familiar with world literature by reading, watching and examining plays. Moreover, most of them did not have the classical Oene background.

I have read, seen and examined many classical plays as well as those by more modern writers. My familiarity with the cosmopolitan literary tradition is what has

helped me to deviate constructively from what was conventional. I have told you that my masters are Molière, Shaw and Gogol, and Ibsen in technique. These are my influences. I could not learn from the Ethiopian dramatists because they were backward in technique.

Q. Could you say that you have attached snobs and upper class hypocrisies in your plays, Marriage of Unequals and Marriage by Abduction?

A. I have just presented the reality. In fact you do find members of the upper class in Marriage by Abduction. There is the Negadras, a member of the rising bourgeoisie, and Fitawrari Merine Tekwas, a member of the feudal class, both of whom are presented objectively. In this play, I have criticised the modern educated young men, who are all talk and unwilling to change.

My protagonist is always somebody who attempts to transform society. Here in this play, the main character, Bezabih, fails, but his failure is a noble failure. What must be seen is not the failure, but the attempt.

My My ideal other-selves are Bezabih and Bahru, whom I have drawn in my two plays. These are the embodiment of my views regarding the themes of the plays.

Maybe I have attached certain feudal values by presenting them as they are. Otherwise, I have not condemned the feudal society by saying "Down with feudalism!" Bezabih is a misfit in feudal society because he dares to apply a traditional solution to a modern problem. He is a radical reformer because he dares do the unconventional. Whether he succeeds or not is immaterial; it is the attempt that matters.

George Bernard Shaw has many characters who are unconventional, like myself.

If you take humour, it is not something that you learn from someone. It is the way you look at life and your nature that determine whether you are humorous or not. In the same way, you do not become tragic through learning. It could be due to genetic factors that one becomes comic or tragic.

Q. In Marriage by Abduction you seem to have strongly supported the theory that abduction is in consonance with both traditional Ethiopian marriage and Western marriage and is therefore a compromise between the two. What do you say to this?

A. I do not support abduction. I strongly oppose the social ostentation and materialistic aspects of marriage which are common in feudal and capitalist societies. I am a rebel against them. I myself married without a grand feast, but that was not abduction.

Q. Could you draw a connection between Marriage of Unequals and Marriage by Abduction?

A. Both are the same in that they have the same subject-matter, marriage, on the surface, and bring out the same theme: the clash between innovation and tradition. This is, in fact, a general theme that other African and Asian writers have dealt with. In this regard, it does not have originality.

Q. Playwrights like Tsegaye Gebre Medhin have elevated the quality of their language in their works, in contrast to your language, which is simple and direct. Consequently, it becomes a little difficult to grasp the others' message by reading alone. A stage performance is essential to understand it fully. But there is practically no problem in understanding yours simply by reading. One does not have to see a performance to understand you. What is the basic reason for your down-to-earth method?

A. Clarity as opposed to obscurity is a problem in literature. My attitude concerning this springs from the School of Qene Poetry. There is what we call the Wadla School of Qene, on the one hand, and the Gondar School of Qene on the other. These two schools of Qene have opposing views regarding Qene poetry. The Wadla School maintains that the value of Qene is reduced if its meaning is discernible without difficulty. The beauty of it lies in its obscurity. Opposed to this view, the Gondar School of Qene, to which my father was a celebrated adherent, is of the opinion that it need not be obscure. It should, on the contrary, be simple but subtle, crystal clear but brilliant at the same time. It should be deep and serious. So this view attracted me, and I made it my own. On top of that, my father's influence was significant. His language was clear and had immediate appeal to his hearers.

Simplicity and directness are not something that you inherit. It is a matter of practice. You can acquire them through hard work; that is, you have to write and rewrite and measure the beauty of your language in order to make it suit the mouth, the nose, the ear, the tongue and the lips. That which is obscure has no hard work put into it; it may even border on obscurantism in individual instances.

Moreover, there is a wrong notion maintained by some writers in our country. They think that Geez is helpful to bring out their feelings and thoughts, and that its use confers prestige on their writings; and therefore they fill their works with Geez terms. But their opinion is far from the truth. Had it been true, who else would have used Geez more than I? I am critical about it. I would say it adds to obscurity rather than to clarity.

A dramatist must be able to construct a plot, and tell a story coherently. It is of no use to keep his message a secret. His prime objective is to be understood; and thereby

to cause a change of attitude in his readers or spectators. In so doing, the dramatist becomes democratic. One does not need to be elitist. Drama and its form do not lend themselves to obscurantism. The language of drama must be simple but subtle. That is my motto, the motto of the Gondar School of Qene:

"The harvest of poetry should be a big heap of Bravo!"

Q. Like the work of Shaw and Mark Twain, any piece of yours is full of fun, in which we find a sustained display of wit and humour. To prove this, it is enough to read your two plays; Marriage of Unequals and Marriage by Abduction. Do you say that your success in this is due to your endeavour to draw a wide range of experience both from your traditional education and your contact with the world literary traditions, or have you something else to say?

A. You do not do certain things intentionally. It comes simply from inspiration. There is no calculation. When I start writing I laugh sometimes. The basis is, I would say, a natural gift. This is the foundation. But reading the works of the classical masters strengthens this foundation. What suits your temper will interest you, and you plunge into writing about it. However, there is calculation in technique; that is, how best to present it.

Q. Some critics have dared to say that you hate your characters, and that is why you make them appear ridiculous and therefore objects of derision. What do you have to say to this?

A. If you really hate your characters, you create bitter satire. This is not true in my case. I do not hate my characters. Otherwise, I would have become a Swift. In fact, I do not show favour or disfavour towards my characters, because I believe that a serious writer must be detached in order to present his characters objectively.

Q. During your stay in England, were you able to hear Bernard Shaw addressing an audience either in Hyde Park or elsewhere?

A. He was in his late eighties. I heard him on radio programmes. In those days he was writing articles.

Q. Not only do you write plays, but you also adapt and translate the works of other playwrights. Why do you do this?

A. If I have enjoyed the plays of others, I want the Ethiopian public to enjoy what I have enjoyed, and therefore I translate and adapt the works of other dramatists. I also feel that both translation and adaptation of world literature would definitely enrich our literature.

Either to translate or adapt a work, I must enjoy it first. If I do not enjoy it, I will not translate it. I have translated Chekhov's and Al Hakim's one-act plays. It is to give them homage and appreciation for their works that I have translated them. I have also adapted Priestley's An Inspector Calls, which I saw in England. It is one of his social and political plays. I adapted this play just to satisfy those who insisted that I should write a politically-oriented play, which they wanted. They naively say that it is easy to write a play or any other literary piece without the urge from within.

Q. You are both a poet and a playwright. Which of these has brought you the reputation you have today? Do you say you have imparted something to young writers?

A. I do not know whether I have a good reputation in the first place. But Poetry and Drama seem to go together. One who writes Drama also writes Poetry. It is appropriate to cite Shakespeare and Ibsen here.

At the time when I received the Haile Selassie First Prize Trust Award, the King appreciated Metsehafe Tizita (Book of Reminiscence) as the best of all my works. He did not like Marriage of Unequals.

With regard to teaching the young artists, I cannot say for sure. I doubt that there is anything I have taught the younger generation of writers. This is for others to say. I simply write when the inspiration comes. That is all.

Q. What about writing in the future?

A. Ibsen wrote after he was seventy years old. Bernard Shaw wrote in his eighties. My father was composing an occasional Qene when he was ninety-seven. I hope that if conditions allow, I shall write until I am eighty.

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned declare that this thesis is my work and that all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Name _____

Signature _____

Place and date of submission _____
