

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF
MEKONNEN ENDALEKACHEW AND KEBEDE MICHAEL
AS REFLECTED IN THEIR LITERARY WORKS

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... **ABSTRACT**

The principal purpose of this research is to identify the philosophies of life that are evident in the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. While Western literature is very well-known for its development in the expression of philosophy, it is difficult to tell what the state of Ethiopian literature is with regard to philosophy. It could not be known for there is, unlike in the West, no extensive critical study aimed at the discovery of the use of philosophy within literary works.

In order to change this trend, this research is designed to look into the philosophies of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. It has been observed from personal studies that there are philosophical elements in their works. In addition to this, since they are contemporaries and representatives of writers of the Postwar period, they are selected as targets of the study.

An effort has been made not only to identify the dominant philosophies of the writers, but also to investigate the similarity and difference that exist between the two writers' works. Following this, an attempt is made to detect the kind of relationship that is found between the philosophy and the form of the literary works. Whether or not the philosophy has affected the form of the literary works in

terms of characterization, plot and setting will be the concern of this study.

The main finding of the research is that there is a striking similarity between the philosophy of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. In fact it could possibly be said that there is no difference at all, apart from the use and selection of the raw material. Unlike their contemporaries who deal with the immediate social, economic and political situations, they have been preoccupied with the discussion of death, life, fate, time, freedom and human nature. As far as the form of their work is concerned, it is noted that there is a relation in that the philosophy shapes the form a good deal. Since the works are didactic, what the writers aim at solely is the transmission of their philosophy; thereby shaping the characters and the plots in such a way that the works reveal their messages explicitly.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a dialectical truth that life has to undergo a series of actions and changes. It is also another truth that life has never failed from changing and thus actualizing the dialectics. A comparison of the present time with that of its predecessors confirms the truth that life is actually on the move. For example, a study of the state of life in the 19th century and that of the 18th century shows a marked difference in all aspects of life. The 19th century witnessed numerous transformations of all types. The on-going revolutions, wars, scientific and technological discoveries of the 18th century have been fewer in number, lower in quality and slower in pace than the ones that occurred in the 19th century. These varied wars, revolutions and scientific discoveries have affected the 19th century man a good deal. It is known that there were revolutions, wars and discoveries in the past, but they were not so root-shaking nor so rapid in speed. While flowing in so fast a succession, not only have they caused a thorough going change in man's political, social and economic life but also challenged his close, private habits of living. Without stopping here, they have shaken the pillars of his faith and reasoning. They have left him doubtful of the authenticity of his morality and religion.

During earlier times, whenever people were perplexed by the meaning of life, whenever they wanted to restore order, and

when they were in need of spiritual peace, they always had a general set of universally-accepted rules at their disposal. What is more, when everything failed, they gained peace by leaving everything in the hands of Providence. On the contrary, because of the changing situation of life, for the new age those past orders and values of things no longer hold true. Since the old ways are no longer workable, the people of the new age have to adapt to the new ways of life; thereby changing and modifying the old systems, customs and creeds. Hence, the outcome of all this is an age of moral uncertainty, destruction of belief, restlessness, despair and anxiety. All these transformations result in the present age that can be characterized by its major preoccupation with search. It is a century of search for a new meaning of life and new faith to which the modern man can cling.

Such is the change that exists in the life of this world, and people from all walks of life have never refrained from bothering themselves from understanding the kind of reality they are confronted with.

Literature has been one of the mediums by the help of which people have tried to make meaning out of life. At different times the major task of literature has been not only to 'mirror life' but also to give a definition or a formula about it. As life keeps on moving and changing, literature does the same thing too. In an effort to depict

the changing life, literature itself keeps on changing. It is changing in that it is exposing a new type of reality. In some parts of the world, particularly in the West, literature is advancing so fast that a gap is created between writers and their readers. This is because writers alongside their depiction of the new reality, reflect new perspectives of understanding life. It is with the special kind of personal outlook that they view life. For example, in France it is said that the change in literature is so radical that writers produce works that are difficult and disturbing to the common reader. Their indulgence in philosophical thinking is so extended that their works appear to be theoretical. The source of their ideas is pure philosophy. The fictional world is used to work out the consequences of their philosophical ideas. More extensively, their philosophical theories are not stated explicitly within their works. The reader is expected to arrive at them by implication. A comparative study of the earlier and modern novelists shows that the former produced works with 'philosophy of life' that could well be understood by readers. The reason for this is that their philosophies are stated in such a way that the reader can comprehend easily. On the contrary, the modern novelists, who are called metaphysical novelists, present a philosophy that is quite alien to their readers. When the presentation is done, there is no explicit dictation of it. The reader is expected to analyze and understand them by himself. There is no



preaching or didacticism. Literature has stopped being a reassurance, an entertainment or a direct imitation of life. If it does such things, it will be considered second-rate writing.

Moreover, this preoccupation in metaphysics results in a change of style. In order to present the new reality, a new understanding appears to be essential. While in the process of trying to understand and view life in their own way, writers have managed to formulate new styles. To cite, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Cayrol, Beckett, Blanchot, and Robbe-Grillet are but the few French writers who introduced a new way of character analysis as a result of their philosophical preoccupation. In their works, characters do not have a greater share. In fact, in most fiction there is no character analysis as such. It is the description of the inanimate objects that has crowded the writers' fictional works. Even when there are characters, it is the objects that are given the due analysis and consideration. The characters are only secondary that need no serious handling.¹

It can be observed that there is a clear difference in the meaning of life between past and present. Besides, there is as well a difference in the reflection and function of literature. Other scholars, especially critics, have also

¹John Cruickshank, The Novelist as a Philosopher: Studies in French Fiction on 1935 - 1960 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962),

tried hard to look into the meaning of life and the state of literature at different times. Western critics have carried out extensive research on these lines. For example, the critical work entitled The Golden Thread is a study of a philosophy of life reflected in the literary works beginning from Homer to Goethe.² The other study the World's Great Age is based upon the same theme as expressed in the literary works from Rousseau to Hardy.³ As a result of such studies, the critics are able to identify each writer's reflection of the meaning of life. Thus, they are capable of saying that such a writer reveals and represents the present day's obsession with the search for faith or such a writer is concerned in the exposition of the old times' sense of security. Besides, these studies made it possible for the critics to see the contribution made both in content and form by each writer to the literary history of the world. Since Western critics have a whole series of data of past and present writers, with the help of comparison, they can satisfy any inquisitive scholar.

An introduction into such kind of readings initiated this researcher to think and be convinced about the importance of a similar job in the Ethiopian context. Hence,

²Philo M. Buck, The World's Great Age (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p.10.

³Ibid.

this research deals with the study of a philosophy of life reflected in the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. So far it has been described why the researcher is attracted to the study of philosophy.

In addition to this, the reason that initiated this researcher to select these two writers to work upon is their being contemporaries which is commonly believed to be indicative of likeness that will exist among writers of the same time. Naturally, it is assumed that writers belonging to a particular time in history reflect, though it is not always true, similar culture, law, political situations and beliefs of that same period they live in. Therefore, it is because of a curiosity to know whether or not the assumption is true that they have become the focus of this study. Besides, the works are selected out of the interest to know to what extent they are alike in their depiction and reflection of the reality of their time.

Moreover, as has been pointed out by Tesfaye Gessesse in his brief study of the Amharic literature, they are classified as writers of the period of the Post-Italian Fascist Invasion. Since the Ethio-Italian war had been the watershed in the life of the then people, one may be tempted to suspect that it will have an impact on the writers' outlook and, consequently, on their literary works too. The

fact that they are post-war writers has also been another reason for this research to have these two writers as principal centres of attention and to find out how their literary works are affected by it.

Finally, the fact that both writers are well-known and the personal observation that discovered that there is a great deal of philosophical elements in their works have been an attraction to such a choice.

To date, no research has been carried out on these lines. This research is different in that it deals with the general meaning of life expressed in the literary works of both Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. Previous researches dealing with Mekonnen and Kebede's works are different; for they do not use a philosophy of life as a yardstick in their literary appraisal. The point of departure of the two preceding M.A. theses, one by Yimer Kifle and the other by Tena Shale, is a thematic analysis not philosophy. What is more, the remaining two B.A. theses, one by Asfaw Asmat and the other by Demissew Bekele, are concerned with the biographical studies of the two writers. Of the two M.A. theses, Yimer Kifle's M.A. thesis concerns itself about the thematic analysis of the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew. In line with his explication of the themes of the works, Yimer has not failed to raise some points with regard to Mekonnen's philosophy. The extent to which this

discussion of philosophy is done can only be described as partial. This is so because the major interest on the part of the critic has been the thematic appraisal of the works. Even then, the limited appreciation that is done upon his philosophy is not free of an influence. His interpretation has been affected by his method of critical approach which is the Marxist theory of criticism. Since there has been a total dependence upon the critical theory, a controversial interpretation is created and this in turn calls for an alternative research that will try to show another interpretation of the same works could also be possible.

Furthermore, even though Tena Shale has made a study of the themes of the works of Kebede Michael, he has not made any effort to look into the philosophies of Kebede Michael. Meanwhile, when making a passing remark about Kebede's philosophy of life, he has made it clear that it is not vital to his discussion because he believed it to be "subservient" to the main interest of the study, therefore, it was worthy of no attention.⁴

Finally, the critical works of the notable foreign critics, by the names Reidulf K. Molvare, Thomas L. Kane and Albert X. Gerald, do not expose any extended study of the philosophies of life of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede

⁴Tena Shale, "Major Themes in Kebede Michael's Creative works" (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1991), p.30. (M.A. Thesis).

Michael. When actually dealing with these writers' works, literary and non-literary, all of them have stated that they have philosophical works but have failed to offer an elaboration of the kind of philosophy existing in the works.

Broadly speaking, the main purpose of the researcher is to have an amalgamated study of the philosophy of life of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael as reflected in their literary works. An attempt will be made to identify the dominant philosophy of life that each writer exposes in his literary works. The research will also try to discover the kind of relation existing, if there is any, between the philosophy of life and the structure of the literary works. It will also strive to investigate the kind of contribution made by the two writers in terms of ideas and literary skills; that is, their contribution with regards to the development of content and form. What is more, as an alternative research, it will try to show that the previously-appraised works can again be discussed from a different angle. The accepted and unaccepted versions of the previous critical analyses in their discussions of the two writers' will be questioned too.

In order to understand the identification of the philosophy of life, there must be an explanation that would give insight into the meaning of philosophy. When in need of having a certain discovery, conclusion or solution, an

attempt is made to think critically about significant matters. This process is what is often called philosophical thinking. Equating the term philosophical thinking with the commonly-known activity of thinking should not imply that any sort of trivial thinking is a philosophical reflection. To philosophize is, as Miller puts it, "to think critically about the biggest things."⁵ What is at the base of this argument is that philosophy is, on the one hand, the ability to think rationally and analytically and, on the other, to speculate about vital issues. The idea of significant matters together with the definition of philosophy is elaborated by Miller as follows,

Perhaps, finally, we may pose a working definition of philosophy, one that does some justice to what we have seen to be both its theme and its variations: philosophy is the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important questions. It has to do with ultimate reality, the meaning of life, good and evil, immortality, human nature and so on.⁶

Furthermore, philosophy, science and religion are similar in that they all involve intellectual activity. Although there is a resemblance among them, it cannot be denied that there is a difference in the degree of the intellectual activity practised. When compared to religion and science, philosophy is not as such limited in scope. It is not as bound as science is to some methods nor is it

⁵Leroy Miller, Questions that Matter: An Introduction to Philosophy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p.15.

⁶Ibid.

committed to something ultimate as religion is. More importantly, philosophy does not depend on the acceptance of facts as final like religion depends upon its acceptance, for example, of God as ultimate. Besides, it never loses itself in such commitments as the worship of God, the active involvement in rituals and ceremonies. Another point that makes philosophy different from science is that there is no restriction in method as such. What is evident in philosophy is the free play of thoughts without any restraint of procedure.

When it is said that philosophy is not ordinary thinking, it should not be taken to mean that it is the job of a specialist. In one way or another everyone is engaged in the act of philosophizing. It is not an act that always requires specialization or demands training of a certain type. Far from this, everyone at different times and occasions busies himself with philosophical thinking. That is why some people say that it is one of the characteristics of man. Sensing the existence of such an ability, Aristotle once said that "All men by nature desire to know." Following this line of argument then, one may very well accept that as artists are men, they can also philosophize about some aspects of life. The elaboration given by Spalding runs as follows, "Yet poets and artists may be

⁷Ibid., p.18.

philosophers-philosophers more sensitive at times to the truth of things than those who endeavour to express it by reason and argument."⁸ Hence, having this as a starting point, this research will try to look into Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael's speculation with regard to the meaning of life, man's relation to nature, and his fellow-men. Their religious teaching, moralistic guidance and political propagation are not the major scopes of the study though they can be raised here and there as passing remarks.

Basically, the rationale used in this research is derived from the critical studies with the same purpose of discovering the kind of philosophy reflected in the works of various writers. When in need of a clue to the kind of elements and points to be sought after, it has made use of the foreign critical research findings.

Furthermore, since this research aims at achieving a valid interpretation, a reference to some literary theories of scholars is made. When arguing against, at some points, the previous research on the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael, this research bases itself upon the theoretical findings of Stein Haugom Olsen, which is largely concerned with the validation of interpretation.

⁸K.J.Spalding, The Philosophy of Shakespeare (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), p.9

The research is designed in such a way that as much information as possible could be incorporated into the whole body of the thesis. It possesses major and minor subdivisions that will create room for the inclusion of vital details that are felt to be relevant to the study. Its organization can be summarized in the following three ways. Initially, there is a first stage where introductory passages are presented. The introduction brings to one's notice the statement of the problem, purpose and scope of the research. Secondly, the research is a revision of the earlier studies made by other critics. Some enlightening critical studies are reviewed as an introduction. Next, with regards to the works of the two target writers, the pros and cons of what has been said by critics will be discussed. Finally, the last part is the actual presentation of the analysis of the literary works. Once this is accomplished, the conclusion marks the end of the research by forwarding some suggestions and recommendations. For additional information, the biographies of the two writers, the books they have written and their similarity and difference with their contemporaries are presented in the Appendix.

The researcher was unable to locate a number of literary works. Mekonnen Endalekachew is said to have written twenty-one books. Of these Atifru Sigachihun Kemigedlu from which Yedem Dimste is adapted for the stage and Yeyihuda Anbessa Lemin Tedefere could not be found. They are neither

available at the Kennedy library nor in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Kebede Michael is said to have written seventy-one books in Amharic, English and French. From these thirty-three are his dramatic works. Unfortunately, a great many of them are unpublished. One of his published works, which is Kidus Gebriel, could not be traced. A personal effort to acquire these books from outside the campus ended in vain. Thus, the research is based upon those that are published and are available.

Besides, the researcher has tried to have an interview with Kebede Michael; however, due to his serious ill-health, it has been impossible to contact him.

It should be noted that the translations of the Amharic texts into English are made by the researcher.

CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Basically, in this chapter an attempt will be made to review the previous critical works done based upon the literary works of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. The chapter consists of two subdivisions. The first part will have a bird's eye view of the general remarks given by both foreign and domestic critics. Pertinent to this, the remaining part will argue for and against some controversial comments that were put forward by critics.

Critics Highlighting on the

Two Writers' Works

As is the practice everywhere, similarly, in Ethiopia the literary works have been sources of attraction to critics. Scholars from outside and from within have been alert enough to compile critical studies based upon the artistic productions of the country. In due course, Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael's works have, consequently, received a great deal of appraisal from a number of critics at different times.

Among the general remarks made upon Ethiopian literature as a whole, Assefa Aregahegne has pointed out that the early Amharic literature can be described as didactic literature.

The early writers have been committed to the improvement of their country so that the people would be as civilized as other people. Since they are change-oriented and since they have considered themselves "apostles" of reformation, they have produced sermonizing works that are aimed at the moral refinement and spiritual strength of the people. Missionaries as they are, their works are religious and moralistic in nature and are meant to direct the people away from evil. Assefa explains this state by saying that "The early Amharic writers felt themselves called upon to promote the modernization of Ethiopian society and to criticize ignorance, superstition, moral and political corruption."⁹ Hence, Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael as they are members of the early writers of Amharic literature their works are said to reflect the characteristic of didacticism.

In the production of their didactic works, the two writers: namely Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael, rely a great deal upon their religious knowledge. Religion, particularly the Christian religion, has been the source from which they drew all their concepts, messages, dreams, fears and aspirations. When explaining a problem, analyzing a reality, predicting the future and expressing a means for man's salvation, they depend largely upon religion. Assefa has remarked that Mekonnen's works "indicate that he is a

⁹Assefa Aregahegne, "The Origin and Development of Amharic Literature" (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1981), p. 7. (M.A. Thesis).

devoted Christian and he is an author of a number of works tinged with a deep religious feeling and denunciation of the vanities of the world."¹⁰ Thomas Leiper Kane has reflected the same fact that "Mekonnen's works are suffused with a deep religious feeling."¹¹ Tena in his research when mentioning Kebede's religious outlook that has shaped his works expressed the following comment made about the Ethiopian writers and the religious influence evident in their works. Quoting Ephriam Isacc he mentions the following,

Religion was part and parcel of the Ethiopian life. It has influenced their ways of living, their ways of thinking, their values. Religion in Ethiopia is a way of life and every aspect of Ethiopian social existence is part of it. Hence, it has provided themes for Ethiopian writers.¹²

It has been stated that Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael are writers of the 'New Era': that is to say, they are writers of the period after the Ethio-Italian war. Albert Gerard in his book Amharic Creative Literature has described the writers of this time, referring to Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael alongside others, as having a rather detached attitude.¹³ For those writers the focus of attention has been neither the immediate, the particular nor the observable. Instead what interests them most has been

¹⁰Ibid., p.11.

¹¹Kane, p.13.

¹²Tena, p.44.

¹³Albert Gerard, Amharic Creative Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.44.

man, life and the world viewed in general terms. Their manifestations are based upon those notions without any particular reference to any society. It has not been their concern to involve directly in matters dealing with the immediate problems of a society and its people's needs. Neither have they been concerned about the elimination of an unwanted cultural practice, political nor social institution of a particular society at a certain time. As far as time is concerned, detached as they are, it is not the present that holds their interest but the remote past. To sum up this, Gerard's comment runs as follows, "The generation after the Italian war took on a more detached attitude and concentrated on spiritual improvement, moral teaching and the glorification of the past."¹⁴

Scholars have felt that the period after the Italian occupation to be a time when a number of literary works have come into existence. At that time what has been remarkable is not the flourishing of the literary activity only but also the new subjects that are dealt with. The war in spite of its being short affected the people deeply in all sorts of ways. Before the war writers have not been in anyway hostile and doubtful of Western civilization. However, after the war they appear to be very suspicious and antagonistic. Some of them felt that had it not been for its mechanized army, Italy would not have dared and succeeded to invade Ethiopia. Such

¹⁴Ibid.

power helped the Italians to exercise their mad ambitions. The result of this has been that writers associated Western modernization with a means to colonization and moral degradation. Since modernization is considered to be a menace, writers have tried their best with the inclusion of a few themes to warn and awaken people against colonization and the deterring elements of technological advancement.

Speaking about the whole situation with particular reference to the period after the war, Gerard says that,

The Italian occupation's impact could not have been very deep but such intimate and hostile contact with the West was bound to introduce interesting modulations in the way modernization was to be contemplated by future writers. Colonial experience further provided imaginative talents with a new fund of themes and motifs.¹⁵

As they are members of this same period, Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael have contemplated about the merits and demerits of civilization. It is also noted that they have produced works that denounce war and inflame patriotism in their readers. Thomas Kane has revealed that Mekonnen in his work "Yekayel Dingaye" has discussed "the evil and good of man's inventions with the help of various allegorical characters."¹⁶

Molvare has also commented that Mekonnen Endalekachew has tried to reveal the negative side of civilization and the

¹⁵Gerard, p.299.

¹⁶Kane, p.41.

tragic results that it is liable to bring about. Besides, he has pointed out that Mekonnen has expressed in his work "Yekayel Dingaye" his unhappiness about the unhealthy destructive direction civilization is moving towards. Molvare's remark reads,

But his strongest attack on progress is delivered by taking up an old Biblical motif: the story of Cain and Abel. Because a human nature is inclined to evil rather than good, "the arts and skills created for the benefit of man went, together with man's nature, in an evil, and not a useful direction."¹⁷

Talking of Kebede too, Assefa has indicated that Kebede has expressed his wrath about the Italian invasion and "about the inhumanity of the colonial system." Besides, Kebede has produced poems that denounce the Italians' attempt and has named their actions as the major evils of the world. He "does not consider the Italian invasion from its major political aspect. For him the Italian Fascist invaders are merely sinners who have trespassed the laws of God and will inevitably suffer Divine punishment."¹⁸

As far as the literary forms of these writers' works are concerned, many observations have been made. With regard to Mekonnen's work, Albert Gerard commented that his works are not different from the then other literary works because they

¹⁷Reidulf K. Molvare, Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Literature (Leiden: Brill, 1980), p.179.

¹⁸Assefa, p.86.

expose the same type of flaw. Since Amharic Literature has been in its preparatory stage, the writers have not been as skillful as the Western writers. Being part of this trend, Mekonnen has not been different and hence has been criticized for his literary technique by Gerard in the following way, "there is nothing to redeem his works from the abysses of triteness where much of Amharic literature is still immersed: no humour, no social analysis, no psychological insight or even interest."¹⁹

On the contrary, Taye Assefa has objected to the extremely generalized criticism of Gerard. By giving a critical analysis of one of the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew which is Almotkum Beyie Alwashim, Taye has tried to prove that there are certainly qualities to be admired in his works. In fact, he shows that Mekonnen's technical qualities are far better than those of Hiruy and Germachew who were previously considered by critics as abler than Mekonnen. Opposing the comments made by Amsalu Aklilu and Mengistu Lemma that underestimated Mekonnen's literary ability, he goes on to say that these critics have failed in exemplifying their general remarks by citing textual references. Having an extended analysis of the work Almotkum Beyie Alwashim, Taye has revealed that "he was capable of writing stories in such a way that they would appeal to the

¹⁹Gerard, pp.306-307.

reader and arouse his emotions unlike the dry works of the previous writers praised by the critics."²⁰

Furthermore, as Tena indicated, Kebede is also criticized for his too mechanical presentation. Overpowered by the idea of preaching, he neglects the proper attention that should be given to his artistic skills. This over-concern for the transmission of his message has deprived most of his works of their quality. Most of his characters are his mouthpieces that echo his sermonizing messages. There is nothing striking and life-like about his plots too. This is so because they are full of repeated stories. However, Kebede has been praised for the simplicity of his style. The clear and exact language he employs in his poems has been a source of admiration.²¹ Tesfaye Gessesse has appreciated his style by saying that it is "written in flawless rhyming couplets, his poems have served as an inspiration for the generation of writers who followed him."²²

Generally speaking, the literary style of Amharic literature has been described as lacking realism. Gerard maintaining his comment says that "literary realism is no part of the African legacy and the Ethiopian reader has no

²⁰Taye Assefa, "Form in the Amharic Novel" (London: University of London, 1986), p.8L. (Ph.D. Dissertation).

²¹Tena, p.16.

²²Tesfaye Gessesse, Ethiopian Literature Before and After the Revolution (Addis Ababa: Afro - Asian Writers, 1978) p.126.

objections either to the supernal virtues of the writers' characters or to the numberless coincidences which enable their plots, such as it is, to progress."²³ Most of the literary works lose their quality as a result of the inclusion of abundant coincidences, prayers, dreams and sermons. Their heavy didactic nature has also contributed a great deal.

Now that the general information about the critical works made upon the two writers' works is presented, what follows is the presentation of the pros and cons of some of the critical works made with regard to the two writers' literary works.

Controversial Issues

Research carried out so far on Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael's works reflect opinions and criticisms that are controversial. The works and with regard to Mekonnen, he himself have been commented on for reasons they should not have been because they are dealt with unnecessarily. Furthermore, some of the validity of the criticism is questionable because the remarks made are not logically verifiable, and therefore unacceptable. Hence, this study will try to argue about those misinterpretations under this subheading, having Stein H. Olsen's theory of validity and other critics' theories as major points of reference.

²³Gerard, p. 44.

Some of the critical analyses made on the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew reveal that the criticism is one-sided. It appears that the critic depends upon a selected theory or to use Olsen's phraseology upon a conceptual scheme and tackles the literary works from the point of this theory to the extent of imposing it upon the literary works. Such a partiality results in controversy. What Olsen means by a conceptual scheme is displaying any literary work with the help of theories gathered from Orthodox, Freudian, Marxist or Christian theories.²⁴

Concerning a selected theory, the practice is that the critics, without leaving room for any chance of looking at the works as they are, are often struggling to force the literary works into the framework of the chosen theory. The outcome of such persistence on the part of the critics provides nothing but misinterpretation. Olsen comments on such a tendency as,

When a critic brings such a scheme with him to the interpretation of a work, he may substitute for the interpretative terms normally used the terms of his own conceptual scheme. This substitution of non-critical terms for the conventional interpretative concepts of literary criticism sometimes yields a new insight into the work. But if one insists that a literary work must be explained exclusively by reference to a conceptual scheme of this type, the result will be a distortion of the reader's

²⁴Stein H. Olsen, The Structure of Literary Understanding (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.157.

understanding of the work. Alternatively, one may get a very rudimentary interpretation of the work.²⁵

Yimer Kifle in his Master's Thesis entitled "A Thematic Analysis of the Works of Mekonnen Endalekachew", has made it clear that his research would try to inquire into the social purpose of Mekonnen's works in the light of the Marxist theory of criticism. In his abstract he has pointed out that "the main aim of the researcher is to assess critically the thematic appeal in the works of Mekonnen from the point of view of the present social situation in Ethiopia." The thesis was completed in 1981 E.C. which was 1973 in the Ethiopian calendar. This shows that the time of the research was the time of the revolution and the Marxist theory was the dominant principle of thought. Besides, the researcher in the introduction of his chapter two has emphasised his method of critical approach as follows. "An attempt has also been made to explore and assess the social purpose of his works as reflected through his works of literature in light of the modern post revolutionary period in Ethiopia."²⁶ As his interpretation appears to be totally geared to this theory, the interpretation is loaded not only with what is actually found in the works but also with the added, imposed ideas borrowed from it. This gives each work a rather twisted meaning.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Yimer Kifle, "A Thematic Analysis of the Works of Mekonnen Endalekachew" (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1981), p. 24.

In his examination of the literary works, the critic shows his inclination towards the Marxist theory. He concentrates on making an investigation with the intention of checking whether or not the literary works coincide with the ideologies and beliefs of Marxism. It is for this reason that the writer's ideologies are analyzed not as they appear within the literary texts but are presented accompanied by remarks that give them quite a different meaning. Since the study of Mekonnen's ideology is based upon a borrowed ideology of a different sort, the religious and moralistic grounds that could best exemplify his ideology are ruled out.

Now that the critic has accepted the theories of Marxism, Mekonnen's literary works are surveyed from the point of view that they have to deal with the oppressed. According to the Marxist theory that which is not for the exploited is labeled as reactionary. Pursuant to this, it happens that when Mekonnen's literary works fail to do this, they are attacked as being reactionary. Accordingly, elements that would prove this remark are sought for ever when they are not there. To this effect, what is within the text is understood not as it is meant to be but as the critic wants it to be.

A practical example of this kind is an interpretation made upon the work "Yekayel Dingaye." Mekonnen has been described as anti-progressive and an all-denouncer of civilization. The description further states that Mekonnen

understands civilization as a present danger whose existence and flourishing could, consequently, bring about unpleasant social disturbances and failures. It does not occur to him that the world has much to enjoy as a result of it. To him, the fact that the rewards of civilization have changed and lessened the many unbearable hardships in life does not amount to anything. Much more than this, he holds that civilization is a menace because the safety of human virtues is threatened by its present trend. The critic says that, "Mekonnen, because he believes that all kinds of social evils emanate from discoveries and inventions, fears that civilization would shatter the values which he considers as good."²⁷ Besides this, the critic comments, "To the artist, civilization, invention and discovery have nothing to contribute to create better conditions of life."²⁸

Based upon this interpretation, the critic made his conclusion by pointing out that Mekonnen "advocates against the introduction of any innovation be it technological or administrative"²⁹ because he does not want the people to see into the intricacy of the social system and start to work for the overthrow of the existing feudal system. Allowing such an insight "he thinks would upset his ethical values plus his economic interests" thereby bringing "a change in the mentality of the people."³⁰

²⁷Ibid., p.59.

²⁸Ibid., p.36.

²⁹Ibid., p.91.

³⁰Ibid.

To call Mekonnen unprogressive and reactionary, the actual work "Yekayel Dingaye" does not supply the right assistance to the interpretation made. On the contrary, a study of the text shows that Mekonnen does not denounce civilization. Nowhere is there an implied or explicit dislike of it. However, one point is clear: his hatred towards war fanatics is evident. History tells that at different times people never failed to reveal their hatred of Fascism, Nazism, Socialism and other 'isms'. Neither did Mekonnen. A number of passages in the work throw light upon the futility sensed by Mekonnen in the fanatical motives and actions of Hitler and Mussolini.

He made all the faculties that have been kindly given by God to be supporters and adherents of Yekayel dingaye and the gunpowder. Thenafter, Mussolini and Hitler with flattering talk and with false hopes persuaded the people of Germany and Italy to go to war. This revealed that the faculties of man and pharmacy had turned out to be the centres of war.³¹

Through the allegorical figures and incidents Mekonnen recollects the time when the world was topsy-turvy. He writes that the world faced the biggest wars because of the crazy wishes of some dictators. Besides, he mentions the tragic scenes that witnessed the damage encountered by people. Hiroshima and Nagasaki are mentioned as extreme examples.



³¹Mekonnen, Arimugne, p.37.

Since Hitler had a strong desire to govern the world, he made all the German chemists to invent destructive weapons. The development of man's thinking and competition resulted in the atomic bomb. There was a fear that this would bring about the world's destruction. Later, this has been proved in the war that was waged against Japan especially in the towns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.³²

In his essay, Yedem Minch, too, he pictures all the shocking realities the world was to experience as a result of war. The world was in flames. The flames swallowed numerous houses and burned millions of young people to death. Mothers wailed for their children and women for their husbands. The consequence of it all is that the dictators, with false hopes, misled and victimized hundreds of innocent people.

The quarter of the world with all its people and wealth was thrown into the flames of war. The homes of numerous people were ruined. Young people were burnt to death. Many mothers lost their children. A number of women, too, were left widows. All this happened due to the madness of three dictators and the negligence of the United Nation to be truthful to its responsibilities.³³

The absurdity of these historical personalities drives Mekonnen to question and critically examine why war is of great interest to man. This extraordinary attraction of man towards which, naturally, he is expected to have a strong dislike has struck him and at the same time served Mekonnen as an area for inspiration.

³²Ibid., p. 38.

³³Mekonnen Endalekachew, Yedem Minch (Asmara: Poligraphical P. Press, 1953 Eth.C.), p.66.

Tracing back to the time of Kayel and Abel, he makes use of the Biblical narrative as a central focus to propound his philosophical analysis. The historical figures, their personalities and the objects they utilize are juxtaposed and valued with the personality of Kayel and the imaginary stone he is said to use to kill his brother.

In the process of his analysis, Mekonnen touches upon the idea that civilization has, in addition to the constructive elements, its disadvantages too. Although man is grateful for the comforts civilization has bestowed upon his life, it cannot be denied that what he has invented as helpful in paving the way to a smooth life is as well becoming harmful. Mekonnen, without being held back by the advantages, hints at the dangerous course of action man's technological activity is following. He expresses his unhappiness by directing his warning comment on the fact that civilization is playing a dangerous role in arranging suitable conditions for the enhancement of war. Man's preoccupation, he says, seems to be starting from Kayel's stone up to the age of the Atomic bomb, the improvement of war weapons. "The children of Kayel using all of their faculties, following the steps of the Kayel stone and the gunpowder, produced weapons that would harm their brothers." ³⁴

What is implied here is, were it not for the abundance and development of armaments, man would not be encouraged to

³⁴Mekonnen, Arimugne, p.36.

go to war. As this is the reality, man whenever an evil thought steals into his mind, not only does he recourse to them but also depends upon them.

However, though Mekonnen provides his pessimistic view about the trend of civilization, what he shows is not an outright rejection of progress and its benefits. He does not, by any means, disregard the fact that civilization has made a contribution to raise the standard of living. Nor does he condemn civilization as worthless. The study of the work "Yekayel Dingaye" proves that it is with calculated caution that Mekonnen's presentation of this work is designed in order that he might leave some room for the reflection of the existing positive reality of civilization. Statements quoted from this work prove this effort as follows, "Man has inclined in his ability to be a worshipper of Cain's stone and the gunpowder,"³⁵ and "All the faculties of man together with man's nature have tended to the production of destructive weapons like the gunpowder."³⁶

This careful choice of words has a function in that it leaves room for the understanding that there is some part of civilization directed to the good of people. The underlined words show Mekonnen's reservation from supplying the idea that all civilization is aimed at destruction.

³⁵Ibid., p.37.

³⁶Ibid., p. 38.

Besides this language clue, another justification for Mekonnen's view of civilization as beneficial is found in his enumeration of its advantages. Within the work "Yekayel Dingaye" the blessings of civilization are listed as the production of the printing press (1468), the invention of the steam-engine (1615) and the discovery of electricity (1875).

Although man's ability has tended to bad doings, he is able to create things that would be of some value to the people. For example, the printing press was invented by John Gutenberg in 1468. Following this, to help people living in different places communicate Deni Popo invented the steam-engine in 1615.³⁷

Whenever a doubt arises with regard to his intention, a reference to his essay Yedem Minch where the same reflection is propagated, would be helpful. Mekonnen repeats and appreciates those same discoveries mentioned in "Yekayel Dingaye" in this work too. Not only does he call them special gifts from God but also regards them as good signs that God is happy and close to the people. His religious belief makes it clear that people, for whatever good they do, are rewarded with skills when they have pleased God. During earlier times people were good and worthy enough to invent the very vital tools of the world such as the establishment of the printing press, the invention of the steam-engine and the discovery of electricity. On the contrary, it is shown that people create weapons of war and are involved in war when God is angry and, therefore, has abandoned them.

³⁷Ibid., p.35.

Because God liked the spirit of unity, he started to be among the people. The world collaborated and came together. As God was happy about it, he gave the people wisdom. He made the sky, earth, air, water, wind and fire to be controlled by man. As a result, the printing press was invented in 1468, the steam-engine in 1615 and electricity in 1875.³⁸

What all this comes down to is the fact that Mekonnen's hatred is not directed against civilization as a whole but, as with war, to some unfavourable aspect of it.

Furthermore, after a deliberate search for the reason why people are cruel towards each other and why, surprisingly, people enjoy indulging in wars so much, Mekonnen presents the reader with an illustration that is believed to reveal the mystery behind it. The exposition of the mystery is developed through the parallelism of man's action with that of Kayel's.

Because Kayle is jealous, selfish and greedy, he raises his hand against his own brother. Driven by these feelings, he never hesitates when he does the devilish act of killing his brother with a stone as assumed by the writer.

In the same way, Mussolini and Hitler, out of mad ambitions, wanted to have complete control over the world. Blinded with this excessive ambition, they made use of any available armaments without the slightest realization of the consequences.

³⁸Mekonnen, Yedem Minch, pp.14-15.



This leads to the awareness that Kayel, Mussolini, Hitler and others dared to take all the terrific risks for they were completely possessed by their personality flaws. From this, Mekonnen develops his philosophical idea that man, assisted by his flawed nature, could create dangerous armaments when they are not necessary, could use them to destroy his fellow-men, could use them to destroy the world or to do any other possible evil. Mekonnen argues that there is no reason why any man who possesses any personality flaw would not repeat the same mistake. His generalization boils down to the conclusion that the source of all miseries is man himself, particularly, his nature. As a result of man's personality trait, man undergoes either pain or bliss. "As you said earlier, because man's nature inclines to the evil rather than good, all the faculties of man together with man's nature tended to destruction."³⁹

A similar view, stressing the danger that the personality flaws are suspected to bring about, is explicitly stated in Yedem Minch:

Pride, selfishness, greed ... in the past, were responsible for people's blood to flow like a torrent and, in the future, they could turn the world upside-down.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Mekonnen, instead of ending his deliberation at this point, continues exploring whether or

³⁹Mekonnen, Arimugne, p.36.

⁴⁰Mekonnen, Yedem Minch, p.73.

not there could be any possible solution for the problem discussed and what exactly, if any, that solution could be.

In his identification of the solution, just as he does a number of times, he supports his explanation with ideas borrowed from the Bible. As this suggests his course of action, his speculation about man and his nature is summed up with the help of Biblical ideas. Resorting to the story of Kayel and Abel and by even going back to the time of Adam and Eve, he shares his belief that right from the outset the world is composed of two types of people. Mekonnen's symbolic representation reveals that there are the descendants of Kayel, weak as they are, who are overpowered by the evil in them. Unlike this, the descendants of Abel are masters of themselves and are known for their love of the good. Thus, the fate of the world is to stand up to whatever circumstances that could be caused by the interaction of these two kinds of people. The only outlet for the individual is either the love of truth or the respect one pays to one's religion. "In this cruel world, rely upon religion and truth."⁴¹

Depending upon what is so far argued, what this research discloses is the considerable difference that exists between the interpretation of this research and that of Yimer. Unlike in Yimer's work, this research would like to show that Mekonnen is not an unprogressive and a reactionary. The

⁴¹Mekonnen, Arimugne, pp.39-40.

literary work "Yekayel Dingaye" does not furnish the reader with the necessary justification needed to call him so. Mekonnen's intention is not to press down the oppressed into dormancy, leaving them inactive. Neither does he trouble himself to sustain unaffected life morally and economically. The evidence in the literary text is sufficient to make Mekonnen not anti-civilization but anti-war. The futility and disillusion experienced after indulgence in excessive wishes, and excessive manoeuvres seem to occupy his attention most.

Speaking from his observation of one reality, which is war, Mekonnen, out of the learned experience, the known reality and the shattered illusions the world and its ambitious rulers have passed through, considers what will happen in the future. He warns that the present obsession of man and his extreme involvement in war could, in the future, destroy the world. Perhaps taking such a line of thinking into consideration and comparing it to today's arms-destruction, Mekonnen would stand out not as unprogressive but as a witty and sensitive philosopher who sees beyond today and thinks ahead of his time.

On the other hand, viewed on a larger scale, no matter how Mekonnen extends his philosophy to a broader study of man's inclination and concludes with a pessimistic view about the world's dark fate, the work on the whole, does not make him an unprogressive writer. In fact, "Yekayel Dingaye" is

found to be a work where Mekonnen is at his most philosophical analysis having man and his nature and, of course, his deeds as the centre of attraction.

Moreover, this research, besides detecting the variance existing between the two interpretations, also discusses the technical controversies regarding Yimer's interpretation.

Looking at the quotations Yimer used to prove his interpretation, it happens that he processes his analysis with an already-formed intention that the work "Yekayel Dingaye" should be in line with the idea of the preferred conceptual scheme which in his case is the Marxist theory.

However, as the text does not fulfil this expectation, because the literary work does not show the interest of the writer in the theories of Marxism, the critic is left with insufficient and unsuitable material to comply with the desired method of analysis. As a result, the critic's search ends with a partial discovery which shows that the critic has used incomplete and incorrect justification to judge the literary work.

By incompleteness it is meant that the justification lacks comprehensiveness. Each element is not looked into alongside the other elements within the work. Besides, each element is not considered along with the major subject of the literary work. The contribution that each element makes to

the overall plan of the work appears to be overlooked. What happens to be a focus of interest is the relation that each element has, taken individually, to the chosen theory.

Accordingly, any thematically-loaded statement which is believed to come closer to the conceptual scheme, which is the theory of Marxism, is discussed and generalized. However, as any thematically-burdened expression is not a guarantee to the discovery of the general subject of the work, the result of such practice is an incorrect interpretation. The function of the thematically-loaded statement might be, without having a significant impact upon the main subject of the work, to give plausibility to the other constituent elements of the work and at the same time completion, consistency and acceptability in the fictional world.⁴²

What is understood here is the fact that the critic should not forget the status of each expression within the literary work; that is, who says it, in what environment it happens and why it is said, should possess the interest of the critic, because as Olsen puts it,

The question about the status of a passage is the question to whom it can be attributed and in what environment it occurs. Failure to take explicit notice of the status of a passage may lead the interpreter to ignore the important question about its significance relative to the subject of the work.⁴³

⁴²Olsen, p.156.

⁴³Ibid., p.130.

When designating Mekonnen as unprogressive and having a negative view about the value of civilization and when he asserts that Mekonnen does not realize the constructive role that civilization has played in the life of the people, Yimer's justification is, "Oh world!... you are the fortune and share of cheats, robbers and Cain's children. But for the spiritualist children of Abel, you are a severe heavy burden."⁴⁴

What is more, when he states that Mekonnen views civilization as a dangerous cause of the creation of all social evil and as being responsible for the degradation of human values, he referred to: "There shall be no peace in the world... . In fact, to attain world peace it is necessary to mediate between the children of Cain and Abel who are living in the two different cities."⁴⁵

The acceptability of these two justifications is questionable because the facts they contain would not prove the deductions made regarding Mekonnen's view of civilization. The status of these two passages within the literary work would not allow such inferences. The reason is that within the literary text their meaning is quite different from the assumed interpretation of Yimer. It appears that Yimer does not question why such passages exist within the literary text. If any attempt is made, it is not to find out their function in relation to the other elements, but to view them independently which makes the criticism all

⁴⁴Yimer, p. 36.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 59-40.

the more incomplete. The lack of correspondence between the quotations and what is deduced from them shows that they are studied not only individually but they are also given a meaning which is not embodied in them.

An overall study of the quotations and the overall text shows that starting from the subject of war and its consequences, Mekonnen extends in every way his philosophical search for the cause of the world's turmoil. Both the physical and spiritual war among people held his attention. In an attempt to arrive at one solid definition, he resorts to the religious belief that the world is created with two kinds of people to live in it. One of these groups is represented by Kayel. People who belong to this group are characterized by their glorification of evil. Truth is not their concern. Spiritually crippled as they are, they aim to be successful. Whereas, those represented by Abel are known for their love of truth and all that which is good. Above all, they have reverence for God.⁴⁶

Since what these two groups of people share in common is very little, they seem to be spiritually and physically at war. Thus, it is not civilization that Mekonnen takes as the source of all social evil and as the cause for the failure of human values.

⁴⁶Mekonnen, Arimugne, pp.36-41.

Mekonnen keeps on philosophizing pointing out, as he understands it, the contradictory nature of the world. Even though the children of Abel live and die for truth, life does not appear to be smooth for them. No matter how good they are, the world does not seem to give them its rewards.

Oh world, for how long will you remain an unberable burden to man? To the thief children of Kayel you are what they could share among themselves. But of the conscientious children of Abel you are a heavy burden.⁴⁷

As can be seen here, Mekonnen's philosophical contemplation does not show that he is opposed to civilization. An overall supervision of the work reveals Mekonnen's deep reflection about man's nature and the vicissitudes of life.

What is here repeated by Yimer is the same kind of practice that once Molvare has been accused of. Taye Assefa has attacked Molvare for his indulgence in the practice of snatching bits of a literary work from here and there without any consideration of their significance to the subject of the work as a whole. When explaining his argument, Taye has pointed out that to call a writer's work a reflection of the writer's, for example, pessimistic attitude, requires a careful study of all the constituent elements within the work. A single character's statement by itself cannot be taken to label the work pessimistic. Instead, the character's statement viewed together with other elements

⁴⁷Ibid., p.41.

within the work is the right justification to arrive at any concluding remark about the work. Only if the bit has a significant relation with the other elements in the transmission of the writer's subject will it be taken as a justification for any general critical remark. Taye elaborates this case with a reference to Molvare's critical tendency as follows,

There is a marked tendency to take isolated statements of the characters literally and the fictional episodes at face value, without reference to their intended functions within the given plot-scheme. A reader who does not know the fictional contexts of the references could be misled into assuming that the implied authors share the views of the characters.⁴⁸

Coming to another criticism made of other works, the same dependence upon the chosen critical theory is noticeable. The presentation of the subjects of Mekonnen's works continues to be debatable. One of the recurring interpretations made on Mekonnen's work is the notion that his works are artistic creations where religion is utilized to serve as a misleading agent planned to smother any awakening from the side of the exploited against the exploiter.

The interpretation maintains that regarding worldly treasure with contempt what Mekonnen strives to show in most of his works is the faith of the people. The sharing of this same faith and the reflection of it is believed to be made

⁴⁸Taye, "Form," p.11.



for the sake of persuading the poor to live as they are without trying to free themselves from the miserable situation they are in.

Yimer's research points out that he derives this interpretation by alluding to two quotations. One is taken from the introduction (Mekdem) of "Alem Weretegna" and the other is from the collection of summarized philosophies in the autobiographical work, Yefikir Chorra.

An examination of the quotation reveals an incorrect presentation. The quotation which is taken from "Alem Weretegna" is partially cited and at the same time misinterpreted. Yimer's citation reads as follows, "this world's affluence and the glory of man, his gold, diamond, silver and pearl too are soil, coal and stone" ⁴⁹

Technically speaking, it is realized that an important phrase which is 'A look at books' is left out from the original text. Such an omission introduces partiality and creates a possible situation for a rather different analytical meaning. It seems that it is because of this possibility that Yimer's critical examination gives a meaning unlike the meaning that could be deduced from the original text.

The exact quotation from the introduction should have been presented fully and should be something like the

⁴⁹Yimer, p.30.

following in order to avoid misinterpretation "A look at books shows that the riches, fame, gold of this world are coal and stone."⁵⁰

In addition to this, the misquotation is susceptible to distortion because it is studied detached from its context. The exact context in which the quotation appears reveals the writer's effort of sharing his feelings about the usefulness of books. His assumption is that books are the necessary tools for the understanding of the world's mystery.

Mekonnen has always discussed the world's innate essential quality as being transient. His view is that the world has a changing nature and that nothing is static. His awareness is that fame, influence and riches are not permanent but timely and fleeting. Hence, Mekonnen reflects that a close relationship with books assists one to have an insight of this type. A lack of such an effort and interest leaves one unable to separate the chaff from the grain. He declares that books enrich man's ability to see into life. He asserts that they are God's special gifts to man in order that they may help him raise his level of consciousness. Besides, they are the driving forces to spirituality. With the help of books, man comes to know his God and develops a reverence for Him. "The ideas written in books are gifts of

⁵⁰Mekonnen, Arimugne, p.48.

God aimed at raising man's level of understanding. Reading books can help man to get spiritual and physical strength."⁵¹

The idea that Mekonnen writes the introduction to stifle the poor is unacceptable since the text does not suggest that. One might be tempted to ask, as often is the case, whether there is a connection between the introduction and the following story "Alem Weretegna". The only connection, if it could be a connection at all, is that there is an educated person who is oriented towards the idea of the Bible and therefore who does good while the ignorant has no idea of what is worthwhile. Apart from this, they do not have something in common. The introduction is a comment about the value of books which is written with the author's goodwill, whereas "Alem Weretegna" is the story in which the author's idea of the existence of good and bad, happiness and sorrow is expounded.

In fact, a connection in the true sense could be traced between the preface 'Megebiya' and the story. But what is found in the introduction 'Mekdem' has a remarkable difference from the story "Alem Weretegna".

Accordingly, Yimer's interpretation fails for three reasons. First, it is supported by an incorrectly quoted justification. Then, the interpretation is made without connecting the piece to the context. Finally, the

⁵¹Ibid., p.46.

interpretation is obtained not from a literary text but from an introduction that has nothing to do with the text. It appears difficult to understand it as a criticism of a literary text when it is actually a comment on a piece of simple prose.

This very same fault is also detectable in the analysis of Yefikir Chorra. What is controversial about this work is when the quotation is not part of the literary text, it is considered as a significant element in judging the literary work. What actually happens in Yimer's criticism is that the interpretation of the artist's view is made solely on the grounds that the information given at the end of the book Yefikir Chorra serves the purpose. The piece is totally outside the literary text. This is because the literary text is an autobiographical work that reveals the love life of the writer. The piece is a collection of a number of philosophies that are expounded in his other works. Therefore, no connection with the plan of the novel is observed. Thus, it is not a strong evidence to be taken and used to criticize the writer.

Moreover, the information that is taken from the outer text is wrongly interpreted.

Since the world is a market place where vanity and snatching prevail, man's fate is to blossom at one time and to wither away at other times. Because of time a man who has had enough at one time would be left with nothing and his traces won't be found at all.*

* Mekonnen Endalekachew, Yefikir Chorra (Addis Ababa: Julius Beltu German Printing Press, 1949 Eth.c.), p.174.

The concern of the author is, as the reading of the piece shows, that man is under the control of fate and time. When interpreting this, Yimer has pointed out that Mekonnen utilizes the idea of fate as a spiteful tool planned to lull the oppressed into submission. He continues saying that it is dangerously presented as having a religious disguise. He feels that what should be there is Mekonnen's effort of encouraging man to change his destiny for good.

It appears that the artist's belief that fate, in conjunction with time decrees that a person should rise up into the balcony or come down to his ruin showing that man has, no control over his destiny. Although Mekonnen's philosophy is presented in a very beautiful and highly figurative language, it is very venomous. It is venomous because under the guise of religion, it disseminates the idea of submission and acceptance of what has befallen man instead of encouraging him to make frantic efforts to change conditions and shape his own destiny.*

Two arguments occur here. Firstly, Yimer's research shows that Mekonnen's philosophy is presented as having an implied harmful and diminishing motive. Secondly, he feels that Mekonnen's philosophy is expressed under the guise of religion.

It can be deduced that Yimer tends to call the citation religious, although there are no explicit elements to make it so, by relating the meaning of unchangeability found in the philosophical interpretation of fate to the idea of submission and acceptance found in religion. However, this is not a convincing judgement because the surrender to fate is not accepted only in religious areas. But it is also the received

* Yimer, p.49.

meaning of life itself. The philosophy of life is that people are at the mercy of fate. Whether they like it or not, they keep on living in accordance with its wish. So what he terms "guise" fails here.

Furthermore, Yimer expected everything found in the text to fit into the already-formed Marxist approach. Hence, he defines Mekonnen's understanding of fate, whose Amharic equivalent is "edle", which is claimed to be beyond man's control to being made with a reactionary motive.

However, the reality is that, expounded in terms of philosophical ideas, there is a wide understanding of the similar but also different meanings of the words: fate, destiny, fortune and chance. They are similar because they all are beyond man's control and are different in the degree of man's involvement. Philosophy has it that the concept of fate means "the future is independent of what the individual can will or not will." Chance has a closer meaning to fate because in chance events are made to happen from nature. Both destiny and fortune have some part in allowing man to take part. The degree of involvement is higher in fortune than in destiny.⁵²

On the contrary, though the Amharic language does not have such a variation in these words, the only one word which

⁵²"Fate," New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1966), II, 850.

'is-edle' has two meanings attached to it. Its functional meaning is that, depending on its context, either to express the reality that man can not stop whatever befalls him or to signify those parts of reality where man is capable of making a limited change.

Nevertheless, Yimer's research does not seem to accept the fact that there exists a purely philosophical distinction among the different but equally workable meanings of the concept 'edle' in the expression of reality without having any bitter hidden motive behind them. Such an effort on the part of the critic raises the disputable practice of comparing two workable meanings of a concept and concluding that the writer has used the one for a bad purpose just because the critic's tendency is to appreciate the other definition of the concept. Because of this, the critic's appraisal ends in subjectivity which is often rebuked in the critical process. The critic does not seem to be respecting what Matthew Arnold, the famous literary critic, who has provided some rules of literary criticism, termed the "disinterested endeavour." What Arnold means by "disinterested endeavour" is not a lack of interest at all. Instead, it means being free of personal and social whims and prejudices.

It is the capacity of being able to see things as they are and for what they are.⁵⁴

It is known that an artist presents life without changing its reality. Even though, for instance, he creates a fictional world, he is never far from depicting reality. In the same way, the critic should be capable of seeing reality as it stands. Arnold says it is through 'disinterestedness' that the critic is helped to "dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things... if not, he could not discharge his duty truly."⁵⁵

If the critic fails to reveal reality, he will produce criticism which is untrue and unrealistic. Thus, the critic ought to strive for what is free, pure and real. Had this been Yimer's concern, he would have accepted Mekonnen's presentation of life through, on a larger scale, the inevitability of fate.

Following his same method of analyzing, Yimer continues to elucidate Yayinie Abeba in the same manner by sticking to his chosen theory of Marxism. In the preface of the novel, the author pointed out that he produced the book as a contribution to the government's plan to abolish slavery. It is an encouragement meant to emancipate the slaves from

⁵⁴Brijadish Prasad, An Introduction to English Criticism Madras: Macmillan India Ltd., 1986), p.213.

⁵⁵Ibid.



bondage. Pertinent to this, Mekonnen brings forth the story of Yayinie disclosing how slavery could be checked and eventually eradicated on moral grounds. The problem is not tackled beginning from the social bases. It actually begins from the individual. The development of the story shows that it is often the uneducated and the faithless who are susceptible to any inhuman activity. On the contrary, those who are educated and know the rules of God would refrain from indulging in such a practice. Within the preface, Mekonnen has summarized the principal solution in one of the golden rules of Christianity by expressing it as "Do for others what you want them to do for you."⁵⁶

Sticking to his appreciation of the Marxist approach, Yimer argues against this method of treating the problem. Should the matter have been tackled by arousing the slaves against their owners, he would have given him his respect. Nevertheless, since Mekonnen's method of expressing has not preferred this course of thought, he is criticized for improperly handling the grand theme of emancipation. The critic puts forward the following question. "Should a work of art which carries a noble theme of emancipation end in this manner?" Besides, he is condemned for failing to underscore the major task of an artist, ascribing to what is said by Mao, which is to guide the oppressed to mass uprising and to

⁵⁶Mekonnen Endalekachew, "Alem Weretegna," Arimuge (Addis : Tinsae ZeGubae Printing Press, 1952 Eth.C.), p. 45.

convince them that they have to revolt wholeheartedly to overthrow the dominating class.⁵⁷

Such an expectation that requires every attempt of the author to come to terms with the favoured Marxist theory seems to lead to the conclusion that the work is a failure and reactionary because it does not deal with the oppressed in the way the critic prefers. Olsen describes such a performance as,

In this case, one judges the work to be bad because it fails to deal with interesting human phenomena; that is, phenomena which in the alien conceptual scheme are considered interesting.⁵⁸

A writer can have his own ideology. Consequently, when a writer has this at his disposal, he should not be considered a failure in grasping reality. The writer's free choice of expressing reality should not be denied. Instead of declaring the author's ideology unsuitable, there must be speculation that would welcome the ideology for what it is. The critic's duty ought to be to investigate whether or not the author's ideology is consistently and plausibly used within the text.

In general, it is this question of ideology that has been the origin for these controversies. It happens that when the writer employs one ideology, the critic applies

⁵⁷Yimer, p.72.

⁵⁸Olsen, p.157.

another. The critic's unwillingness to see the authors' ideology for what it is led him to rely entirely upon the borrowed ideology expecting the author's to come to terms with it. However, as the works are written from the point of another ideology, the critic fails to come to grips with them. As a result, as Olsen puts it, "alternatively, one gets a very rudimentary interpretation of the work because the alien conceptual scheme can not be made to fit."⁵⁹

Even then, to have good access to these rudimentary interpretations, the critic, in addition to the literary text, has to resort to a non-literary text. The literary texts are analyzed not on the grounds of what is inside, because they refuse to obey, but of what is outside the text. What is more, when what is gathered is not agreeable and sufficient, an exaggerated diversion is noticed. It appears that the author and his life are pinned down for reasons they should not be.

Due to the incompatibility of Mekonnen's philosophy of life with the kind of life he leads, he has been accused of insincerity. Yimer has quoted Mekonnen's philosophy of life as that which believes in the production of valuable books by people who have undergone the hard facts of reality and have tasted the bitter side of life. Besides, he has pointed out that Mekonnen related he had had the same experience and, therefore, had written all those books. However, there is,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

as Yimer asserts, a lack of correspondence between the life he said he experienced and the actual comfortable life he led.⁶⁰ Hence, the critic has emphasized the fact that "the sincerity of the writer is to be questioned because his philosophy of life contradicts the very life he leads."⁶¹ The kind of life style he has is expected to be the living proof of his expressed views.

Nevertheless, a reference to the text provides the reader with rather different information. Contrary to what Yimer has pointed out, what Mekonnen claims to be an initiative into writing, at least for him, is not the chance of being thrown amid misery and hardship. Nor is it because he is to taste the bitter side of life and be subjected to extreme suffering and poverty. What he remarks about his life of confinement in 1923 (Eth.C) at Akaki and his life in exile during the Italo-Ethiopian war is that it has been satisfactory. Describing his life at Akaki, he says that he owns a house which is sufficient to leave him uncomplaining and composed. "By the river side I have a house which is sufficient to satisfy a man who says this is enough."⁶² Talking of his life in exile too, he says that he feels no less. His exact words confirm this as, "in that house we lived happily knowing and sharing our duties and

⁶⁰Yimer, p.38.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 37-38.

⁶²Mekonnen, Arimugne, p. 7.

responsibilities"⁶³. Following this, one would be tempted to ask what the source of his inspiration is. He has been repeatedly and emphatically explaining that he owes those two experiences very much as a result of which he is lucky to acquire solitude, the source of his inspiration.⁶⁴

In the introduction to his collected works Arimugne, Mekonnen shares his outlook that considers man to be nobler than animals because he possesses knowledge and an ability to think. He has a belief that even though man has this natural talent, the mastery of it by itself will not take him anywhere unless it is backed up by conducive situations. Man, in order to make his abstract thoughts concrete and produce worthwhile books, must be educated. He has to have time and be in a tranquil environment. Besides, Mekonnen reflects that, at times, man will get the chance of creating refined works of knowledge assisted by the experience he gains from melancholy, misery and solitude.

Although people have natural talents, to be fruitful they also need education, time and a peaceful environment. In addition to this, misery, melancholy and solitude would help man to create useful ideas and knowledge.⁶⁵

Among these, he relates it is solitude that has done him a great service. With the sufficient time he has at his leisure, the tranquil life has helped him arrange suitable

⁶³Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 7-9, 26-27.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 7.

opportunities for him to have a dialogue with his conscience and to gather and jot down his observations. "Due to this, in the quietness I was able to have time to talk with my conscience and to jot down some notes."⁶⁶ He specifically pointed out that while leading a solitary life upon the hill and amidst nature, he produced all the stories found in his collected works Arimugne. "Besides having time and books to read, living amidst the tranquillity upon the hill and the church that was built upon the hill which evoked spirituality, helped me to produce Arimugne."⁶⁷ What all this proves is that there is no inconsistency between what Mekonnen believes and what he has actually gone through. Thus, he should not be accused of insincerity.

The conclusion is that whenever there is a strict adherence to conceptual schemes, the result is often ambiguity and wrong inferences about the literary texts. Yimer's research too reflects these consequences. Firstly, as a result of this tendency, there appears to be a methodological confusion. Secondly, wrong conclusions are made about the literary works.

The general worry is that the lack of a distinction that occurs between the literary piece (novels, plays) and the non-literary pieces (essays) seems to be observed throughout Yimer's research. It appears to be difficult to understand

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 27.

whether the focus of the research is the literary works or the non-literary ones. Though the researcher has pointed out that his aim is to criticize the literary works of Mekonnen Endalekachew, he does not seem to stick to it. It should be noted that a reference to non-literary material, without a total reliance upon them, can be made. They can serve as an additional decorating material aimed at either as a strengthening element or as a finishing touch. But this does not mean that they are the primary target sources.

Furthermore, it appears that the works of Mekonnen are misunderstood. Since they are studied under the strict guidance of an outside ideology, there does not seem to be any chance for them to be taken as they are. An extended use of the conceptual scheme often forces the critic to ignore significant details. Such an inclination, as Olsen puts, "would not allow the free play of concepts which is often necessary to understand a literary work of art."⁶⁸

The central cause for all this is cultural and periodical influence. Before he knows it, a critic might reflect his cultural or periodical (capitalist, socialist or other biases), as is the case with Yimer's interpretations, because Marxism has been a dominant thought during the time of his research. By all means, to avoid such an impact the critic is expected, as Olsen requires,

⁶⁸Olsen, p. 157.

to set aside one's own view of reality, to recognize the limits of one's own conceptual scheme and to describe a work using only such terms as either provided by the author or such as the requirement of multiple relatedness.⁶⁹

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 154.



CHAPTER TWO

INTERPRETATION OF THE TWO AUTHORS'

PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael have attempted, in their literary works, to make meaning out of life. What has been proposed or generally taken for granted as "what is life?" has been the nucleus that attracted their attention. Man as a central agent in this process of living has been studied in relation to himself, other fellow-men, society and nature itself. Both writers have been curious to know whether man's action and man's stay on earth is limited or infinite or whether his ways of living are worth pursuing. They have also wanted to know what the governing force of life and man's action are. In an attempt to solve these queries, they have indulged in philosophical thinking about life and death, fate and time, the hope of man and freedom. Such concepts have been used by both of them as points of departures to their reasoning. Hence, the interpretation and analysis of these queries and their solutions is what this chapter aims at.

A characteristic feature of both writers is that their philosophical thinking is not purely in abstract terms. What is meant here is that they do not explain in purely philosophical terms. Instead, they turn to religion as the

final point of analysis. When faced with the inconsistencies, confusions and unreliability of this world, they leave everything in the hands of God.

Consequently, the characters they form are portrayed fretting and struggling in the ups and downs of life within the fictional world where dissimilar forces confront one another. Initially, though the influence that these entities make upon the characters is treated philosophically, the two writers eventually resort to religion as a final means of explanation. The writers do not delve into them and into other realities of life purely from a philosophical point of view. Neither do they explore to satisfy man's inquisitive nature. What is more, instead of continuously striving to produce, from different angles, analyses for the curious non-stopping questions of man, they end up in religion.

In fact, having a moral touch, the philosophical explanations are meant to draw people closer to their God, to make them know Him and develop a reverence for Him. It can be generalised by saying that the philosophy they share with their readers is utilized as a means to an end. By revealing the mysteries of this world, which is mostly exposing the futility of it, the philosophical approach is aimed at attracting the people to God and to the afterlife and, of course, to Christianity.

Life and Death

Both Mekonnen and Kebede understand this world, besides its being too short to allow man as sufficient time as he wishes, to be contradictory, unreliable and meaningless.

In "Alem Weretegna", Mekonnen explicates the contradictory nature of this world through the allegorical dream narrative told by Yayinie Abeba. Yayinie relates that Ras Sewe Bekentu, attracted by the fake beauty of Alem Weretegna, decides to stay with her hoping that he would attain happiness at all times. It is not for him to be sceptical when Alem tells him that her husband is away and will never return. He does not even hesitate when he accepts her offer that promises everlasting happiness. He believes her when she swears that she will be his and remain with him forever. Alem, pleased by his positive reaction, rewards him with the following gifts,

Ras Sewe Bekentu comes out of Alem's house decorated with gold right from his head down to his toe. And after the shouting and clapping the man said, "I give to my child and lover, Ras Sewe Bekentu, happiness and sorrow, desire and lust."⁷⁰

Alem Weretegna, who represents the world, here bestows upon Ras Sewe Bekentu, who represents man, both happiness and sorrow contrary to what she said she would bring him. Though Ras Sewe Bekentu confusedly keeps on begging for an additional pleasure, Alem strips him of the momentary comfort

⁷⁰Mekonnen, Arimugne, p.56.

he is in and forces him out of her house, telling him that he has had his day and she is to invite somebody else who has not faced the same experience.

The underlying meaning is that the world is not reluctant enough to make man live happily all the time nor does it leave man to wither away in unmixed misery. The world is, instead, shrewd and calculating enough to relieve man from grief, sadness and distress and at the same time to deprive him of long-lasting happiness. Time and time again, the world never ceases to interfere in man's day-to-day experience; blending this experience with happiness and sorrow.

As this is a characteristic feature of the world, the possibility for man is to face whatever befalls him. It is for this reason that Gebre Egziabher tells Yayinie Abeba that it is difficult to find a person who remains always happy or who is doomed and, unfortunately, sad throughout his life. Whether or not one likes it, one can not escape these two experiences. Yayinie Abeba, when she, hating to see him suffer because of her, tries to persuade him to return home but he refuses to do so. What he said to Yayinie is this,

Since it is said that there is no one who is always happy or sad, Yayinie let us be happy and not complain about the hardships we face. In fact, to be a celebrity, man has to prove himself successful in the face of hardship.⁷¹

⁷¹Ibid., p. 53.

Furthermore, Yayinie's life reveals this philosophy that maintains the co-existence of happiness and sorrow. While she is leading a wretched life, as a slave with her mistress, she happens to meet Gebre Egziabher, her sole saviour. One unlucky day she must fetch water from a very far away place. As the pot is too heavy for her to carry, it slips out of her hand and is broken. Knowing that her mistress would beat her to death, she sits there crying out loud. Drawn by her cry, Gebre Egziabher arrives ready to relieve her from her burdensome life. After their decision to go away, they start their journey through the Adal land. On their way, they are ambushed by the Adal's and Gebre Egziabher is killed. This is a blow to Yayinie. Before she knows that she is happy, she falls into deep sorrow. Overpowered with pain, she runs to a monastery. For some time she stays there in seclusion until one day she discovers that the old woman she is made to look after is her mother from whom she has been separated for many years. Again, before she starts enjoying her happiness, her mother confides to her that her father died a long time ago. This left Yayinie torn between the two feelings: happiness and sorrow. Confused she asks her mother what to do, "what shall I do mother, shall I weep or shall I laugh? I have found you but father is dead."⁷²

It is this contradictory nature that is discussed in Tsehay Mesfin too. Through the concept of fate, it is

⁷²Ibid., p. 74.

indicated that man is to be rich at one time and poor at another time. Out of luck, it happens that an influential person turns out to be a nobody. A person who has been famous and glorious becomes insignificant just because time has denied him that which it has kindly given him before. As opposed to this, a wretched person makes his way up the ladder because it is the will of fate. This is evident in the life of Tsehay. At the beginning of the story, Tsehay is said to come from a rich family. She then has the chance of going to Paris to pursue her education. Unfortunately, due to the Italo-Ethiopian war, she returns home and before long her father dies. To be out of trouble and to do away with the ever-coming poverty she marries a man who again dies shortly after. Although she becomes acquainted with Alemu, who is influential, she is not successful in marrying him. Finally, she dies after being sick for some time.

On the other hand, Alemu whose background is not as well-to-do as Tsehay's, manages to get high up the ladder. As he is very rich and educated, he promises to help Tsehay's poor children. Those poor children are lucky enough to be in his hands because they are privileged in every way, which marks a complete change in their life. Those children who are formerly wretched are now advantaged. This reversal of situations shows how life is full of opposites and how life keeps on changing.

Mekonnen not only imparts the changing nature of the world but also reveals that it is the very cause of the world's unreliability. The world is discovered to be unpredictable because it moves of its own accord. Tsehay explains that the world is not dependable as follows,

My brother, have you not read in books that the world is unreliable? The world when you expect it will be giving, it won't and when you think it won't, it is there full of rewards. It cannot be trusted because it moves of its own accord.⁷³

Furthermore, Mekonnen's contemplation reveals that life is so short that there is not much time at man's disposal. Although it is man's wish to delay time, 'Time's winged-chariot', let alone stopping for a second, would not bother to check and minimize its speed. On the contrary, it continues to fly hurriedly without being heedful of man's love of life. Before he knows it, man is through his time and goes back to where he comes from. In his work Yehilm Ruthcha he comments that,

Time does not stop marching forward. And man counts the passing of time in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years without ever being able to bring back those happy days and to push forward the unpleasant ones.⁷⁴

Mekonnen's comparison shows that just as a shadow swiftly passes away so does man's life. A flower grows,

⁷³Mekonnen Endalekachew, Tsehay Mesfin (Addis Ababa: St. George Printing Press, 1960 Eth.C.), p.53.

⁷⁴Mekonnen Endalekachew, Yehilm Ruthcha (n.p., 1949 Eth.C.), p.1.

blooms and eventually withers away and comes to its end. In the same way, no matter how intelligent, rich, powerful or strong man is, his fate is to die and to become dust. He, in the work Yehilm Ruthcha, states that the end of man's life is his grave.

Just as all rivers flow together into the ocean and remain there, man continuously treads his way to his grave never to return. The ocean and the grave won't become full; the same phenomenon keeps on repeating itself.⁷⁵

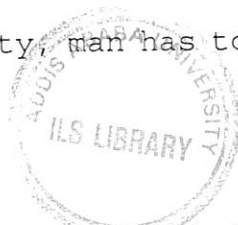
Speculating from a purely philosophical point of view, Mekonnen's philosophy with regard to this world and death does not continue in abstract terms. As usual, it resorts to religion; thereby having a moralistic purpose.

Accordingly, man is said to be dead when his body and soul separate. This parting occurs as a result of a disconnection between man's conscious and subconscious mind; hereafter man's soul leaves the body on earth and goes to the other world arranged by the creator God. Its settlement there is assured according to the judgement it receives there. It will reap what it sows during its stay on earth.⁷⁶

Mekonnen's idea behind this is that thinking of the world's unreliability and of man's mortality, man has to work

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁶Mekonnen Endalekachew, "Yedhotch Ketema," Arimuge (Addis : Tinsae ZeGubae Printing Press, 1952 Eth.C.), pp. 131-137.



for his afterlife. The aim is to make man wiser than Ras Sewe Bekentu. Ras Sewe Bekentu has been foolish enough to value and weigh this world more than anything else. Blinded by the fading beauty of this world, he prefers paying tribute to it rather than taking time to consider and improve his unpromising ways. He keeps on respecting Alem's misleading ways though she has put him out of her house. In spite of Alem's unwelcoming signs, he remains her slave to the dismay of Death, Alem's husband. Unwise as he is, Death ridicules Ras Sewe Bekentu's mindlessness and kills him.⁷⁷

Unlike what Ras Sewe Bekentu has done, what is expected of man is, therefore, an indulgence in matters that bring him closer to his God not in worldly matters that are his enemies working against him. Man's ultimate plan should not be the attainment of this world's happiness but that of Heaven's. Otherwise, man will be a loser just as Ras Sewe Bekentu has been and will end up in Hell.⁷⁸

Mekonnen's conception of the world is not different from what Kebede Michael imagines it to be. It is observed that Kebede's outlook towards life is similar to Mekonnen's in every respect. In his poem "Happiness and Sorrow Mixed", the contradictory nature of the world is reflected through the explanation of happiness and sorrow that are said to be

⁷⁷Mekonnen, Arimugne, p. 58.

⁷⁸Ibid.

the two forces of the world. As man has always been a victim of these two contradictory forces, it is rather difficult to categorize him as either happy or sad. His life has always been blended with them. There has been no time, not even a single second when the world is all happy or all sad. The world is mysterious as always in that it looks like a happy, charming and well-dressed bride only to turn out to be when approached a miserable widow.⁷⁹

In addition to this, it seems that all events take place against man's expectations. It happens that the order of life is that at times due respect is not to the powerful but to the weak because all of a sudden the robust turns out to be fragile while the feeble gains strength. At other times, what is of little breadth is widened when the broader is narrowed. Still more, the rising of the moon marks the setting of the sun. It is not for the world to make all people equally happy but that the poor are to be made wealthy while the rich are doomed to poverty. Just as one part of the world darkens, the other becomes as clear as day.

Kebede describes life as impalpable as any dream. While man is groping blindly after it and before he actually finds out what it is, it vanishes into the air. There has not been much time before it passes never to return. Besides, like

⁷⁹Kebede Michael, "Happiness and Sorrow Mixed," Berhane H.
(Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1961 Eth.C.),
p.100.

Mekonnen, Kebede too compares the swiftly passing nature of life to a shadow. Life keeps on moving and the result of such hurry is not a great surprise but death.

Kebede's reflection about death is exposed in his poem "The World and Time." His exposition shows that nature, besides dismissing man from the earth, compels all other things to disappear too. The poem reveals the different experiences faced by an individual who has had the chance of observing a certain place with its varying scenes. Whenever he walks past the same place, he comes across new and dissimilar happenings. The first time he goes there, he finds a big house situated in a rich and beautiful garden. During the following trip to the same place, he discovers not a striking house but a grand and famous city known for its civilization. His journey is rounded off when he is faced with a rather different picture from those experienced before. The house and the city are now replaced by a wide, dense forest occupying the area without any remaining signs of the former glorious possessors. At the end of this poem, Kebede comments that the central aim is to show that the changing scenery is an implication that life is changing and that as time goes on everything in the world alters.⁸⁰ He emphasizes the same idea in another poem, under the heading "Teleke Hassabotch", which reads as,

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 26.

The children of Adam, the handsome, the rich, the smart the genius and the witty, just like flowers they all grow and perish without being able to stay alive forever.⁸¹

However, the two writers, in spite of their gloomy outlook, do not leave man as hopeless as that against death. Both have indicated possible ways by the help of which man can conquer this universal enemy. The way to immortality is to think of the afterlife beforehand and do according to God's rules to be ready for a smooth entrance to the comfortable part of it. The writers have asserted that one has to sweat in order to have valuable deeds that would guarantee a promising afterlife. In addition to amassing worthwhile virtues, what they claim to be an immortalizer is an ability to produce significant artistic works such as paintings, books, and photographs that will live longer than their creators.

Fate and Time

Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael have used the concept of fate to understand the meaning of life. Kebede, just as Mekonnen does, utilizes the concept of fate and time as a means to the interpretation of the world's unreliability. Based upon it, he contemplates the changing and unpredictability of life and so does Mekonnen.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 88.

Looking at the understanding Kebede has with regard to fate, it is realized that he believes in the unmanageability of fate. Though he does not deny the limited effort man can apply to shape his fate, he also realizes and accepts the existence of a governing power which is totally beyond man's reach. Man is always at the mercy of fate. Kebede's poem "Man's Fate" presents the belief that man cannot escape his fate. The rhetorical question set at the end of the poem echoes this feeling. It reads, "How can man get that which fate has not given him?"⁸²

Furthermore, Kebede keeps wondering about the fascinating workings of fate. It appears that man's fate is arranged before he enters this world. Right at the outset one is destined to be a prince while another is to die of misery. It is full of contradiction and confusion because usually it happens quite to the contrary. Kebede states that whether or not one likes it, fate keeps on working on its own. He generally points out this as,

It has been said that just as one cannot stop the passing of day, night and time, whether this way or that way, in this world there is also so much that must happen.⁸³

This same piece of poetry is used as an epigraph to his play Yetenbit Ketero. The whole story moves based on the idea of the epigraph. As it is indicated in the prophecy,

⁸²Ibid., p. 28.

⁸³Ibid.

the king's daughter is supposed to marry the astrologer's son. The king disgusted by the idea plans to have the boy killed. Nevertheless, by chance the child finds his way out and gets married to the king's daughter. No matter how hard the king tries, his daughter ends up marrying the astrologer's son. All this is meant to happen by the gods, therefore, it takes place despite the king's untiring effort to prevent it from happening.

To sum up, in many of his works Kebede has stated fate, time and again, as one of the realities of life. In his play Anibal, the hero's failure is attributed to fate when he says that he is the slave of fate not the master.⁸⁴ The same mention of the controlling nature of fate is found in his poetry about king Tewodros and in his play Yeketat Maebele.

Mekonnen, too, has a similar view. Before his eyes, man appears to be under the controlling hand of fate. The novel Tsehay Mesfin is an expression of this thought. The literary work shows that Tsehay is struggling with the ups and downs of life. She is pictured as a victim of a controlling power she cannot resist. Her lot is to be happy or sad, fortunate or unfortunate because fate is there to decide what she should be. It is not her wish that her father or husband should die. Neither is it her wish to be left miserable,

⁸⁴Kebede Michael, Anibal (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1961 Eth.C.), p.66.

facing the tough responsibility of bringing up her children alone. Later, before she knows it, she is to fall in love with Lej Alemu. Feeling the same, Alemu shoulders the responsibilities for the upbringing of Tsehay's children after she dies. What keeps events in motion is not the will of man but the workings of fate. Although the impact of social, economic and political factors cannot be wholly rejected, they cannot be admitted as dominant. However hard a person strives to shape his fate, there are limitations. The reality is that there is a supreme controlling agent that pre-calculates the steps by which the world is bound to move.

Nevertheless, Mekonnen's interpretation of fate has been understood in another way. He has been accused of ignoring man's effort which could be directed to the shaping of his fate. Such a criticism appears to eschew important data. The text provides the critic with significant elements that would stand for Mekonnen's wider understanding. His comprehension of the concept fate is not presented as narrowly as Yimer's work has taken it to be. Besides explaining the meaning of fate as something beyond man's control, Mekonnen has also tried to describe man's untiring struggle to have his wishes fulfilled. This has been revealed in Tsehay's pretensions. For the first time in her life, she has to face the hard fact of lying. What is more trying is that she must deny that she has children. Failure to do this would then mean losing an important chance

of marrying Lej Alemu. In order that she might marry him, she feels that she has to appear young, free and single.

Hence, Mekonnen does not rule out the meaning of fate that encompasses the idea that man can shape his destiny too. There is an evident justification as far as this is concerned. While Lej Alemu and Tsehay are strolling in the graveyard, they discuss the importance of hard work in order to be wealthy and powerful. They agree that man has to work if he wants to be influential.⁸⁵

Mekonnen would be rightly accused if he were unrealistic enough to deny that man can do something practical about his fate. In fact, he asserts that there is a supreme governing force which directs everybody's course of action. No matter how hard man tries or how just society is, man will never escape his fate.

Mekonnen's idea about fate has its origin in his own personal life. All the initiation to form his understanding of it, as he puts it in his autobiographical work Yehilm Ruthcha, has been his stay in the royal circle and his relation with a certain unnamed priest. When he was young, he said he tried his best to be honourable. To be high up in the ladder, he said that he was convinced of being very tactful. Although it was his wish to be successful since he

⁸⁵Mekonnen, Tsehay Mesfin, pp. 32-33.

was not on good terms with Lej Iyassu, the then ruler of Ethiopia, he failed. In spite of their disagreements, Mekonnen struggled to improve his connection. He stated this as, "since my fate largely depends upon our relations, I laboured to improve my fate and be close to him."⁸⁶ To his dismay, he lost all hope. He, then, consulted the unnamed priest regarding what to do. The priest appreciating his effort, advised him not to worry. Quoting from the Bible, he told him that he had to wait until fate turned her face towards him.⁸⁷ After some time Mekonnen declares that fate had turned her face to him during the reign of Haile Selassie. He attained the desire of his heart and became one of the officials.⁸⁸ As can be deduced from this, Mekonnen has the two sides of fate which prove that he is not, by any means, against man's effort to change or improve life.

The way Kebede Michael understands fate is not different from Mekonnen Endalekachew's. Even if he believes that man's action is on the whole governed by fate, he does not deny that man has his role to play. Hence, the king in Yetenbit Ketero is not left inactive after he is told the prophecy. He does not just sit there idly waiting to see how things will turn out. In place of this, he has plotted against the son, the would-be husband of his daughter. What matters is

⁸⁶Mekonnen, Yehlim Ruthcha, p. 13.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 17.



not the unsuccessful outcome but the effort he spends in order to stop the unwanted marriage from taking place.

What both writers believe to be the designer of fate is God. Kebede in his Yetenbit Ketero has revealed when the king, whether he likes it or not, is forced to accept his daughter's marriage to the astrologer's son. He explains saying that everything has been decided by God. In the same way, Mekonnen repeats the following,

For fate is the programme of God, our life on earth totally depends upon it. It also reminds us that whether it is our wish or not, or whether or not it is for our own good, we have to move according to His plan.⁸⁹

The Hope of Man

As far as man's future is concerned, both writers do not seem to rely much upon this world. To a large extent, their hopes lie upon the future. Accordingly, the kind of views they air and the kind of expectations they share seem to be rather gloomy despite a few optimistic reactions made here and there.

Mekonnen's pessimistic view, which is found in almost all his books, seems to be summarized in his work "Yekayel Dingaye." The pessimistic view expressed in his work seems to arise from a narrower observation of man's obsession.

⁸⁹Mekonnen Endalekachew, Taitu Bittul (Addis Ababa: n.p., 1950), p.79.

Then, it expands further to a broader realization of his behavioural inclination.

In the narrow sense, the work reflects the futility of war and the disillusion that is usually experienced afterwards. Based on this awareness, the work gives man's technological advance in armaments a dark picture. It reveals man struggling to exercise his limitless ambition by choosing war as a means to an end. It even darkens it by stating that man employs his God-given faculties for only one purpose. His preoccupation has not been the improvement of other spheres of importance but the proliferation of the harmful. Beginning from the time of Kayel, he has been dedicated to improving the quality of war weapons from gunpowder to the most refined and complicated atomic bomb. "As the saying goes, a bad tree bears bad fruit; the children of Kayel have converted all the God-given gifts into slaves of stone and gunpowder."⁹⁰

Mekonnen continues to say that the result of such idolization has been an inexpressible loss. The over-ambitious Hitler and Mussolini who choose such a line fail to actualize their exaggerated intentions. What they reap is neither fame nor super power. It is neither immense wealth nor an affluent life. On the contrary, they are confronted with death, shame and failure.

⁹⁰Mekonnen, Arimugne, p. 37.

On their way, Hitler for the sake of his mad feelings, harasses guiltless women, old people and children who have nothing to do with any sort of bad deed.⁹¹ Mussolini not only victimizes other people but also leaves his own in economic crisis and dishonour. In addition, Hitler shakes and disturbs the world's stability. Due to man's involvement in war, Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been severely destroyed.⁹²

The work maintains that shocking though the reality appears to be, people are reluctant to learn from such past mistakes. Disinclined to any improvement of whatever kind, they proceed in the same old manner. In an attempt to find a reason for this, the work philosophically suggests that man is inclined to the exaltation of evil rather than good. This lays the ground for the work's pessimistic view to develop.

Man is presented as small-minded and morally inferior. He is discussed with particular reference to Hitler and Mussolini having selfishness, greed, jealousy and excessive ambition as his distinguishing traits. As these deprive him of his good sense and reason, his utmost interest is to obtain the greatest benefit at the cost of anything good or bad. The present day is a time when one sees that people are wickeder than before. Referring to this, Mekonnen points

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid., p. 36.

out, "In the world, there won't be peace. As it is said, the last will be worse than the first. And so the children of Kayel have become more sinful and evil."⁹³

The text notes that no kind of religion and no kind of philosophy can prevent people from the wrong in which they are immersed. Since the majority of people have given deaf ears to their teachings, the untiring efforts of Jesus Christ, who is the representative of the religious advocates, and those of Diogenes, a Greek philosopher (413-323 B.C.), who is the representative of philosophers, have been wasted. Ato Belto denies listening to the miraculous voice that brings recollections of king David's tone of regret on account of his wrong doing. Just like him people want, as ever, to remain ignorant of the miserable state they are found in and to believe that it is no time for any alteration.

Due to this, it happens that the world has reached the stage where evil is in almost complete control. Hence, the world is pictured as nothing but a bucket into which all evils are pouring and at the same time overflowing. This makes life so unbearable for the few descendants of Abel, who respect their conscience, because they are overshadowed by the descendants of Kayel who, on the contrary, have no sense of morality whatsoever.

⁹³Ibid.

There appears to be a sense of doom in the work that reveals the uselessness of life in this world. The work propagates such a stand because the writer believes that the world favours and gratifies people when they should have been punished. As the world is only a paradise for the children of Kayel, the only consolation for Abel's people is that they will enjoy their life in Heaven where they are supposed to enjoy God's reward.

The very gloomy view of the text suggests that the world is found to be in a most sinful age. It seems beyond the power of religion and philosophy to help people develop goodwill. Since the world is dominated by the children of Kayel, nothing good is expected to come out of it. The fate of the world is suggested to be punishment by fire. The despair is reflected in the search for an end through this punishment. This is expressed at the end of the work as, "The world because it has produced fleas, it is to be burnt in the fire like an old rag."⁹⁴ Mekonnen believes that what has been prophesied in the Bible will come true. He suggests that there is no other alternative for the world than such punishment by fire.

Kebede's pessimistic way of looking at the world is not very different from that of Mekonnen's. In fact, there is a close resemblance in the logical argument they put forward

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 41.

when stating what the future holds for man. As can be observed in one of his poems that is found under the title "Teleke Hassabotch", Kebede, looking back on the past, makes a comparative study of man's actions and manner of living beginning from the time of Adam up to the present. His analysis exhibits that the present day man is no better in anyway whatsoever than the earlier man. It appears that man has not been once enthusiastic and devoted enough to learn and improve from already-committed mistakes. The degree of interest to improve has decreased from time to time and nowadays it has reached the point of zero. Man has become as lowly as animals devoid of any conscience. Despite the many punishments, like the expulsion from Eden, Noah's Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah, man continues in the same way. Since he has given deaf ears to the teaching of the prophets and Jesus Christ, their efforts have been wasted. It has become the common and the easiest practice for him to be involved in evil and that has made him worse than ever.⁹⁵

According to the two writers, it is war that is predominantly projected as one of the evils of the world leading the world to severe destruction. Both physical and spiritual war are studied with the spiritual war being the controlling element in the causation and realization of the physical war.

⁹⁵Kebede, Berhane Helina, p. 90.

As to the physical war, Mekonnen's "Yekayel Dingaye" and Kebede's "Atom" seem, to a large extent, to be unduly concerned with the idea that people are keenly interested in sophisticating war weapons that are the very causes of their own destruction. They are the responsible factors for the disturbance of peace.

Kebede discusses that the result of knowledge is twofold. On the one hand, it has a constructive outcome that could make living easier and enjoyable. On the other, the discovery and production of war weapons make life hard to bear. By citing the use of the atom in some useful areas such as medicine and the use of this same atom in the production of the atomic bomb as an example, he concludes that man with the help of his faculties has been able to build and at the same time destroy. The world has reached starting from gunpowder up to the age of the atomic bomb and, thus, man has reached the time when his existence is felt to be in danger because people are misusing these weapons to exercise their mad ambitions. Mekonnen's "Yekayel Dingaye", too, elaborates how the development of war weapons has reached beginning from gunpowder up to the atomic bomb and mentions why Nagasaki and Hiroshima are the victims of the destruction caused by the sophisticated war weapons.

The two writers pose the question why man's tendency is for the flourishing of that which is perilous. While trying

to investigate why such a tendency has become a common reality, man's personality flaws and the inclination of man to the glorification of these flaws are found to be the responsible contributing factors.

People, in spite of the many troubles they face, still opt for the continuation and complications of the old line of combating. It does not seem that people regret the turmoil they are liable to bring about as a result of their fighting. What is more, it does not occur to them that their behavioural disposition, particularly their personality flaw, is the driving force for their later evil deeds.

On the contrary, the reality is that people are ignorant of all the chaos they have brought about and are responsible for. Yet, without the slightest grievance, they keep on preparing for still another calamity.

The trend of such an action is, as assumed by Kebede, to bring closer the end of the world. The work "Yekayel Dingaye", which has a similar view though it partially discusses the good in terms of technological advantages such as the introduction of the printing press, the discovery of electricity and the production of motor vehicles, its main focus is that the world has become intolerable because of man's evil deeds. The end of the story indicates that the

world has reached the millennium where the only salvation is believed to be God's punishment with fire.

The only consolation suggested by the two writers is the love and respect that should be cultivated and developed to look after one's religion and philosophy which is the love of truth.

Freedom

The kind of freedom that these writers talk about refers to the distinction one has to make between what is good or bad. The kind of understanding they have about good and evil polarizes on the favourable and unfavourable human personality. Throughout their fictional works what they discuss, to a large extent, is about these two concepts. Their comprehension of what is evil and of what is good is not different from that which is philosophically explained by Leroy Miller. In his work Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy he comments on moral evil as,

We have moral evil, the evil that results from personal depravity. Torture, murder, war, cheating, exploitation - these too, though very different from natural evils, are certainly evils.⁹⁶

In addition to this, what is assumed by both writers as the morally good encompasses fidelity, kindness, honesty, truth, love of God and one's religion, possessing all the

⁹⁶Miller, An Invitation, p. 322.

possible virtues and having reverence for God; all emerging from one source which is the human goodwill. Just as Miller believes, they stress the importance of respecting what is morally right and doing what is right just because it is right and for no other reason.

Man is expected, therefore, to free himself from what is against the good. One of the ways by the help of which one attains freedom is expressed as developing the will to learn, to self-criticise, and to control oneself from repeating the same mistakes again. Both writers accept that man may be tempted to fall into worldly traps; however, it must be his duty to free himself from the bad and seek truth and righteousness. That is to say, man has to develop the conscience which helps him to regret and to take action to improve. Mekonnen's idea of freedom consists of every action which will be made to free oneself from worldly vices such as greed, selfishness, theft and falsehood. Man is expected not only to keep himself safe but also, if by accident he gets caught, to develop the strength to free himself and to be wise enough to seek the right way. It seems for this reason that his characters, once they have erred, end either in a monastery or in nature, usually in the forest. The meaning is not literal here as Yimer points out in his research. Yimer has pointed out that Mekonnen believes going into a forest or a monastery assists man to inherit God's kingdom. His exact words point out that,

Mekonnen upholds complete seclusion as one of the ways that enables man to inherit the kingdom of God, because he believes that society harbours evil. The artist also states his belief that solitude in the bosom of nature enables one to attain everlasting happiness.⁹⁷

Mekonnen's meaning is not to be taken literally because when Mekonnen makes his characters go either into a monastery or a forest he is not imparting the meaning that people have to straight forwardly go to those places. The basic meaning is designed to arouse people to love honesty, truth and innocence. This can be best explained by looking at the way natural life and a monastery are used to propagate the kind of freedom the author requires from people in his work Yedem Zemen. What is projected in this work is man's frantic effort to accumulate abundant wealth and man's incessant desire to be powerful. Man is looked at as this selfish desire encourages him to betray his own brother and deny his own religion.

Out of greed, Lej Ayalew, who is the brother of Weregna Fassil, and Lej Seyoum, who is one of the members of the nobility and a friend of both, struggle to destroy the loving relationship that is found between the king, king Tekle Haimanot and Weregna Fassil. In order to gain what they have aspired after, they conjure up all the tricks, even involving magic. They succeed in provoking a fight that brings about Weregna's defeat and imprisonment. Later, their cunning

⁹⁷Yimer, p. 31.

plan, tragically drives the king to kill Weregna whom he adores and cherishes. Eventually, the truth behind their intrigue is revealed to the king's fury and regret. As a redemption for all that takes place, the dejected king abandons his royal life to lead a solitary and hazardous life in a monastery.

As opposed to this unbridled passion for wealth and fame, there seems to be the reflection of the extreme good. The ultimate good is presented as simplicity which is devoid of human frailties such as greed, delusion, jealousy, infidelity and faithlessness.

It is brought out that if it were not for man to be controlled by such weaknesses, and if his wish were not to be their slave, it is unlikely that there would be confusion and disorder in the world.

Exposing the mind of Weregna while he is watching the fishes in the lake, the extra-diegetic narrator echoes the belief that the animal world is to be envied and craved for because it is free of any worldly temptations. To the reader, Weregna appears to be pathetic. It is a pity that he does not belong to the world which is as plain and simple as that of the animals'. His world is a world that is full of people who know no shame but are mercilessly determined

to die for their own advantage at the cost of what is good.

He reflects,

Truly, the life of these animals is far better than mine. Even though they eat one another, it is not out of any bad feeling but only because it is nature's order. They are not envious or do not have any enemy as there is no difference in position, in clothes and in their ways of living.⁹⁸

Within the embedded story, the queen, king Eskindir's wife, appreciates such a simple life too. She declares that the serene life of the forest is a source of pleasure to her and her nakedness a comfort because it reminds her of the cleanliness that Eve had before the expulsion from Eden. But the luxurious life of the palace, as it is full of immorality, is nothing but a nagging pain to her. It is a living proof of all the defilement she is freed from.⁹⁹

The same idea is continued and confirmed by the way the whole story finishes. The king, unhappy with the royal experience, decides to give up everything and start anew in the monastery. The royal life, viewed beyond its literal meaning, stands for that which is worldly and misleading in many ways whereas the life of the monastery is representative of that which is simple and unadulterated.

⁹⁸Mekonnen Endalekachew, Yedem Zemen (Addis Ababa: Artistic P. Press, 1946 Eth.C.), p. 78.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 38.

What the text suggests is not a claim for the absolute. Instead, it emphasizes the notion that people have to refrain from idolizing certain worldly vices. Even when overwhelmed with some evil, man should possess the moral strength to help him out of his own obsession. Unless man is ready to understand and correct his flaws, the world will remain a tragic scene. Besides, man will lose his dignity because he is not exercising his conscience which largely differentiates him from the animal world.¹⁰⁰ This same idea is reflected in his other works "Alem Weretegna", Joro Tebi and Tsehay Mesfin.

Feeling the same, Kebede imparts to his readers that man's greatest achievement is the due respect he gives to his conscience. He emphasizes that, by any means, man has to do away with all the evil that robs him from actualizing this accomplishment. What is meant here is he has to prevent himself from working and living for the sake of worldly pleasures only, from confining himself to all sorts of vices, and above all, from failing to listen to his nagging conscience. Otherwise, there would be nothing to differentiate man from the animals.

The Nature of Man

Mekonnen's analysis of man's physical state contains a speculation that questions the constituent elements that

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 54-56.

make man a human being. His description maintains that man is made up of water, soul, fire and earth.¹⁰¹

Continuing his elaboration, he points out that whenever man dies, the soul separates itself and flies up to the sky whereas the body remains on earth and decays and disappears. The characteristic of fire then turns cool, the water turns into blood and the earth becomes earth.¹⁰² Mekonnen does not take his analysis further philosophically. What he actually enunciates is the religious understanding with regard to the fate of the soul after its separation from the body. Once it is in Heaven, the soul will be made to see the record of its sin and if it has any, it will be made to stay in complete darkness until Judgement Day. On the contrary, if it is not sinful, it will wait in light with the good company of other holy souls.

Mekonnen, in his book Kebukaya Eske Meker, has enumerated a number of stages that man has to pass through. The first one is characterized as the age of innocence. It covers the period from birth up to twenty years of age. At this stage, man does not care for worldly matters apart from playing and sleeping. However, when he is close to twenty, he is easily attracted to the outside world. Since he is not well experienced in worldly matters, he needs someone

¹⁰¹Mekonnen, Arimuge, p. 130.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 133.

who could lend him a hand. Often it is in the hand of women that he seeks for guidance and comfort.

The following stage consists of the years between thirty and fifty. While thirty, not only does he feel responsible for his children but he also begins to grieve for the wasted early years and money. All he strives to do is to compensate for what is lost in the past ten years. At times, he even turns out to be very selfish and neglects his religion and sense of morality. What Mekonnen advises here is that man has to consult books of morality, philosophy and religion. At the age of forty, he becomes sober and devoted to his job. His love for politics and law takes the place of his love for his family. But at fifty the eagerness of those years fades away. He starts coolly to weigh situations. He does not bother about obtaining much more money nor any fame. Unlike the man in his thirties, he will not be bothered about his children and his family. Unlike the man of forty, he stops actively, daringly and sometimes arrogantly participating in competitive circumstances because he feels that he is no longer capable and competent.

The last stage falls between sixty and hundred years. In the sixties, he completely stops worrying about his future and develops great patience. The future appears no more problematic to him because his children are all grown up and are responsible. They, in turn, begin to look after

him. The age of seventy is the time when man recalls the past and struggles to be like what he was in the old good days. However, since he is becoming weaker, the result is hopeless. The remaining years up to hundred are the doddery age. Mekonnen teaches that people should look after old people.¹⁰³

¹⁰³Mekonnen Endalekachew, Kebukaya Eske Meker (Addis Ababa: ZeGubae Printing Press, 1965 Eth.C.), pp. 9-17.

CHAPTER THREE


PHILOSOPHY AND FORM

Introduction

The primary concern of this chapter is the relation that is said to exist between the two writers' philosophy and the form of their literary works. Initially, an attempt will be made to identify the existing relation and to see if the form of the literary works is either dominated by the philosophy or free from it. Another point of interest is to see whether the degree of domination makes the form of the literary works lose or gain naturalness. The last effort will be to provide a discussion with regard to the two writers' contribution, if there is any, to the development of form in Amharic literature.

Plot

A closer observation of the works reveals that there is an over-exaggerated connection between the writers' philosophy of life and the form of their literary works. What the authors seem to be committed to is the transmission of their thought as convincingly as possible. The authors' inclination to the propagation of their philosophy has deprived the works of the due consideration that they should have received from their creators. It has never occurred to them that the presentation is also another aspect that needs proper treatment. For this reason, the aesthetic quality of the work is ignored in that the plot and character formation



is totally geared from the point of view of communicating the philosophy only. Their plot and character creation appear to be mechanical to the point of exposing some defects.

Much cannot be said with regard to Kebede Michael's philosophies of life and their relation to his plot construction and characterization because a large number of his works that show his philosophy of life are his poems. Among his plays Yeketat Maebele and Yetenbit Ketero are the only ones that indicate a clear relationship between his philosophy of life and the form of the literary works. His other plays do not contain his philosophy. They are historical works.

However, his work Yeketat Maebele is a result of such a tendency. As the story itself shows and as can be seen in the preface, Kebede is repugnant to the view of life that denies the existence of God, and as well he abhors man's belief that is convinced about the super power of man. Since he is doubtful of this trust in the 'superman', not only has he called, Nietzsche and Lenin, the propagators of those views, the great evils of modern times, but also condemned them outright for their upholding and giving rise to such contemptuous ideas.

Furthermore, he maintains that the lot of a man who, bewitched by such theories, dares to follow their steps is to suffer the consequence which is a complete lack of peace of mind that comes about as a result of a realization that he is a failure. Although he considers himself a 'superman', in reality he cannot escape his death. What is more, he cannot free himself from his nagging conscience. Hence, Kebede hurriedly drives Belayneh to his end which is death in order that he may awake and understand those facts are true at the last hour. He is made to be aware that he is so little and weak before the really existing creator which is God.

Accordingly, at the outset of the story Belayneh is designed to test the bitter experience of abandoning his God and ending up worshipping the power of the 'superman'. In producing this story, as the writer is possessed by his subject, he forgets to challenge Belayneh by two strongly opposing distracting forces. The only fully-drawn character is Kelile, an equivalent of Mephistopheles, who stands for the evil spirit. This character, in addition to his being carried over to the end of the story, is gifted with so appealing and persuasive a language that lulls Belayneh to fall into his mischievous trap. On the contrary, the good spirit that is represented by Aragaw, besides his being drawn too unconvincingly to attract any attention, let alone win Belayneh to his side, disappears at the beginning of the

story. The reluctance, on the part of the author, to develop this character to the full has stripped the plot of having a well-intensified dramatic conflict.

Moreover, the plot is short of varied dramatic incidents that could contribute a good deal to the lifelikeness of the plot. For example, no single incident is dramatically presented or reported to expose the highly-regarded talent of Kelile. Apart from his never-ceasing sophisticated talk, he has been nowhere to display his ability in necromancy, nor has he been able to prove his unlimited power in any practical involvement. It would have contributed a great deal to the lifelikeness of the play if little incidents had been created to give Kelile the opportunity he missed. As a result, this deprivation has made the plot shallow and dry. The reason for the author's tendentious style is observed by Getu Mulatu as follows:

As the play is didactic, the writer has quite apparently focused on what he believes to be the directly ultimate result of a philosophy which denies God's existence and promotes the worship of the Devil more than anything else.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, looking at the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew, it can be said that there is a relation between his philosophy on the one hand, and his plot and characterization on the other. With regard to plot, it is

¹⁰⁴Getu Mulatu, "An Adaptation of Foreign Drama in Amharic" (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1990), p. 65. (M.A.

noted that among his works "Alem Weretegna" throughout its progression propagates the author's philosophy that maintains the existence of happiness and sadness side by side. Yayinie's life history begins in 'media res' where her unhappy life with Woyzero Nuritu is being narrated. It has been indicated, with the help of a flashback, that this life is a source of sorrow for her when compared to her earlier life which was full of happiness. The reader is made to look back with the narrator's description and with the help of distance that Yayinie maintains within the story. It is revealed through the narrator's description in very few phrases that, while staying with her family, she has been treated as a child without being deprived of her childhood pleasures. Not only has she been permitted to celebrate the children's festival known as "buhae" but she has also been provided with all care and comfort. On the contrary, living with Woyzero Nuritu does not justify such trivialities as celebrating Children's Day nor does it permit a little rest when rest is needed. As can be seen here, the inclusion of the flashback as well as awakening interest and creating suspense, juxtaposes the two opposite sources for Yayinie's opposite experiences.

Later, when she happens to meet Gebre Egziabher, she shares her experiences with him and entreats him to save her from harmful and dangerous people. The repeated adjectives she uses such as "the cruel", "the animalistic" and "the

merciless" indicate that she is maintaining a distance from her unhappy life with Woyzero Nuritu and from her previous experience with the so-called saviour bandits. Remembering the bandits with detestation, she asks him whether he is as animalistic as the bandits. Telling her that he belongs to a religious family, he plans to rescue her from the unhappy situation she is in. After a few moments, all of a sudden he picks her up and begins to flee to an unknown destination.¹⁰⁵ At this point the plot appears to be jumping. His sudden aimless decision to run away, carrying Yayinie like a box, makes the plot unrealistic. The fairly good beginning of the story loses its charm at this point.

Continuing the story, the writer confronts these two travellers with the Adals who are known for their butchering practices. For these Adals, killing people, particularly men, is the most delightful experience of all. Thus, meeting Gebre Egziabher and Yayinie for them is an opportunity that should not be missed. Making the best of the situation, they leave Yayinie alone after they have killed Gebre Egziabher. Yayinie, deprived of the momentary happiness she gains from staying with Gebre Egziabher, remains in utter bewilderment and despair.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵Mekonnen, Arimugne, pp. 50-53.

¹⁰⁶Mekonnen, Arimugne, p. 59.

The end of the story is not far from the main purpose of the whole story that has been developed so far in line with the intention of showing the co-existence of happiness and sorrow. After her long stay in the monastery, Yayinie discovers that she is living with her mother. The nun whom she is made to look after is her own mother from whom she has been separated for a long time. It has been a great pleasure for her until she realizes soon that her father is dead. Unable to entertain the two opposite feelings at the same time, she asks her mother what to do to which her mother replies that it is no good bothering about them but to shun them and be content with the life in the monastery.

What all this adds up to is that the story right from the beginning up to the end has been a reflection of the existence of happiness and sorrow as expressed in the life of Yayinie. This implies that the philosophy of the writer has served as the driving force of the story.

Furthermore, Mekonnen's belief in the unreliability of this world has made him produce his novel Tsehay Mesfin. The unfortunate life experience of Tsehay illustrates this philosophy. Her life has always been at the mercy of this reality. At the opening of the book, Tsehay is described as belonging to a well-to-do family. She has all the privileges that wealth can bring and, thus, is pursuing her education in Paris. However, before she completes her education,

because of the Ethio-Italian war that breaks out in her country, she has to stop her education and return home. The war has left her without a father; therefore, she has to take care of herself. Since she does not know English, getting a job has been difficult for her because English is the medium of communication that has been required in most jobs. Because of her bad luck, she has gone down from the high social class she belongs to. Tsehay without losing all hope strives her best to improve her life. Hence, when she happens to meet Lej Alemu, who is a rich man, she even dares to lie in order to marry him. She denies that she has any children. Although she dies very young, she has won Lej Alemu to her side, and he is there to look after her children. Her children, in spite of losing their mother, are lucky to have a rich stepfather who makes life easier for them. The flow of this story has not failed from exposing the writers' philosophy. In all its progression it is an explanation of the world's changing nature.

Generally speaking, Mekonnen's philosophy of life is the basic element in almost all his works. It has been the primary useful source in providing the story line for his moralistic and historical artistic works. For example, the works Joro Tebi, Yedem Zemen, Taitu Bittul and Salsawi Dawit are explanations of the philosophy that reveals the belief that the world is in chaos because of man's glorification of his personality flaws. Out of greed, the characters in Joro

Tebi and Yedem Zemen indulge in destroying the good life of other characters with the help of evil deeds such as lying, betraying and corruption. Moreover, the notion that states the transitoriness of the world has been the cause for the production of "Alem Weretegna", Tsehay Mesfin and Yedhotch Ketema.

What is observable in the plots of many of his works is that there is little attention given to the artistic quality of the works. For example, Mekonnen has repeated the same defect, observed in Kebede's works, of not having as many realistic incidents as possible. His characters do not have any other jobs apart from those that are meant to be accomplished by the author. Besides this, his stories are loaded with unnecessary and redundant details and dreams all of which contribute to the looseness of the plots.

The work "Alem Weretegna" is full of repeated incidents. When Yayinie Abeba meets the monk and tells him the reason why she is crying, she is made to repeat the whole long poem of sorrow for the second time. She is first heard to say it at the death of Gebre Egziabher.¹⁰⁷ It would have been enough to tell the monk in a single statement that the death of Gebre Egziabher is the source of her sorrow. Since there is nothing very significant about the poem, a summary of it would have sufficed.

¹⁰⁷Mekonnen, Arimugne, pp. 61-62.

Repetition is also common in Kebede Michael's works. For example, in Yetenbit Ketero the story of the little boy is told several times. It first has been narrated by his astrologer father; then by the priest and for the third time by the king.¹⁰⁸ This has resulted in redundancy and monotony.

Besides, the intervention of the supernatural happens to occur too often so that it appears to be trivial. Their frequent recurrences make them appear unrealistic even in the religious framework. This is so because in the religious context the supernatural does not intervene as often as these stories reveal. Perhaps this could be attributed to the influence imposed upon the Amharic writings by Geez literature. Nevertheless, its unhealthy imposition has affected the naturalness of the works. In "Alem Weretegna", at the end of the story the reunion of the mother and the daughter takes place in the evening. The priests do not have any idea of it. When in the morning the reunited characters are thinking of ways to break their news, however, the priest comes and tells them that a spirit has told him in his dreams that the two have been reunited. Mekonnen could have done this otherwise. A sudden dropping in at their room to pay a short visit could have created the opportunity for the

¹⁰⁸Kebede Michael, Yetenbit Ketero (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Printing Press, 1939 Eth.C.), pp.35, 94.

priest to hear to the news.¹⁰⁹ This in turn would have made the incident more acceptable.

In the middle of the plot of "Alem Weretegna", extra details that have no relation with the plot have also been included. Some poetry used in church ceremonies is incorporated in the work. What is more, direct quotations from the Bible also crowd most of his works. Observing this practice, Thomas Kane says that,

No one can fail to note how often religious formulas or expressions of piety occur in Amharic literature. Quotes from the Bible often in Geez, prayers and sermons are found in abundance. There is undoubtedly much that is trite and mechanical in this as they are formulas which have become current over the centuries.¹¹⁰

Similar to this, in his work Yedhotch Ketema, there is a geographical detail that takes up twenty pages with no significance whatsoever to the actual plot.¹¹¹ As such, inclusions are in no way related to the story and they are fruitless efforts on the part of the author. They merely reflect that their writer is carried away by his personal fanaticism.

In addition to these, what is common in his work is the superfluous use of dreams. Although dreams are very

¹⁰⁹Mekonnen, Arimugne, pp. 73-75.

¹¹⁰Kane, p. 217.

¹¹¹Mekonnen, Arimugne, pp. 139-158.

important, when used beyond the limit or when used when not needed, the result is a lack of artistic ability. The main character in Yedhotch Ketema too often sees dreams that are valueless to the story. One such example is also the dream of the priest in "Alem Weretegna". Within the same work, the nun in the monastery comes to know that Yayinie is her daughter through the dream she sees. At the beginning, since she has abstained from many actions including talking and seeing, she has no other way of looking at and meeting the girl. When Mekonnen feels that it is time she meets her daughter, he looks for an explanation in a dream.¹¹² Nevertheless, the story could have been more lifelike if she had listened to Yayinie's voice and had identified it as her daughter's. That could have been a reason to justify her decision to give up fasting and join her daughter.

Since such kind of redundancies fill the story, the reader feels lost and unable to follow the story closely. Due to the existence of the many distractions and lack of concentration, the message fails to appeal. When talking about the relation of form and message, Percy Lubbock has explained the same fact which runs,

The well-made book is the book in which the subject and the form coincide and are indistinguishable - the book in which the matter is all used up in the form, in which the form expresses all the matter. Where

¹¹²Mekonnen, Arimugne, p. 68.

there is disagreement and conflict between the two, there is stuff that is superfluous of there is stuff that is wanting.¹¹³

The other side of this use of dreams is the appropriateness that it has at some points in the respective stories in which they appear. The dreams inserted in the works "Alem Weretegna" and Yedem Zemen are vital to the story for they contribute to the development of the plot. The dream in "Alem Weretegna" contains the allegorical story of Ras Sewe Bekentu. Its message that teaches the unreliability of the world has been accepted by Gebre Egziabher and put into action when he says that this is an important dream for them for it has made him courageous.¹¹⁴ Afterwards, ignoring the pleasures of the world he determines to do good and help others in order that he may be welcomed by his creator. Such a contribution is promising because it plays a part in the development of the plot.

In Yedem Zemen, Weregna Fassil has not been convinced of the importance of going to Gojam. In spite of his relatives' nagging pleas, he remains unmoved and unattracted. No matter how shrewd and calculating they appear, it has not occurred to him that he has to act against the king he respects and loves. Making war against the king appears to him totally ridiculous and unacceptable. However, when his

¹¹³Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p.40.

¹¹⁴Mekonnen, Arimuge, p. 57.

relatives insist that it is God's command, he seems to be rather moved for the first time. One day before he finishes thinking about the astrologer's prophecy and before he decides what to do, he happens to have a dream. The dream reveals that he is to be the ruler of Gojam and, therefore, has to make war against the king. Weregna satisfied and persuaded by the dream, actually sets out to perform what he is compelled to do.¹¹⁵ The dream here has served as an agent that forces Weregna into action.

Forgetting the didactic element included in most of the dreams, it is noted that many dreams are instruments for the projection of the theme of the work. In "Alem Weretegna", it consists of the major philosophy of life of the author. The dream exposes how the transitory world fools people with worldly temptations and finally leaves them to utter damnation. It contains the moral that one has to labour for the afterlife by being very humble, devoted and God-loving.

Other dreams are the result of the characters' psychological tension. Tsehay, once in her life, has denied that she has no children. But this has kept on worrying her a great deal. The degree of tension that is built up within her burst after she has dreamed of the death of her son. The use of dreams for the reflection of the emotional feelings of the characters is found in his other works, Yedhotch

¹¹⁵Mekonnen, Yedem Zemen, p. 114.

Ketema and Salsawi Dawit. Mekonnen's use of dreams could have been appreciated had it been free of the common style of the writer which is very didactic. Since they are full of didactic interest, they are robbed of their artistic quality. The problem in the use of dreams in Amharic literature is described by Taye Assefa as follows,

While most of the Amharic dreams lack subtlety in their predictions and generally have a negligible impact on the outcome of the central action, quite a few are innovatively used to develop the plot or generate suspense.¹¹⁶

Characterization

Throughout Mekonnen's works, his philosophy has its impact here too. Just as it has made the plots of his works incline to one side, his characterization reveals what Anver Zis calls "inadequate artistic talent that inevitably leads to the sketchiness in the delineation of characters."¹¹⁷

Most of his characters in their behaviour are completely bad or good. The bandits and Woyzero Nuritu are extremely bad and outrageous. They do not have any human characteristic whatsoever. The good characters are, on the other hand, good without the slightest flaw. Besides, the characters are shallow. They do not appear to be complex.

¹¹⁶Taye Assefa, "Tewodros in Historical Fiction" (Addis A. : Addis Ababa University, 1981), p.41. (M.A. Thesis).

¹¹⁷Zis Anver, Foundation of Marxist Aesthetics (Moscow: Publishers, 1961), p. 14.

They speak and think only what the author wants them to do. They have no other interest, no philosophy, no thought apart from the one interest which is the main philosophy and thought they are made to project. In most cases, they appear mere mouthpieces of the author. That is why his characters always talk about one dominant thought only. In almost all of his works, they project a single thought-pattern. The priest in Yedhotch Ketema, Tsehay in Tsehay Mesfin and Lej Mesfin in Salsawi Dawit discuss the unreliability of the world and man's tragic end, which is death. Apart from this, they have nothing to joke about, they have no family matters to think about, and they have no animals or property to boast of.

Furthermore, for a character to be lifelike, everything about him should be given in detail. To make characters either good or bad, and to make them religious, moralistic, rude or polite by itself does not amount to anything. A fully-fledged, three dimensional character with his physiological, sociological and psychological description should appear in the fictional world. Otherwise, if characters are made to be one-dimensional the result is a work which appears to be like a folktale rather than a novel or a short story. Naturally, in folktales almost all the characters are one-dimensional; therefore, they do not have depth.

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Accordingly, some characteristics of a folktale are evident in the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. For example, in "Alem Weretegna" there is no description that shows what Yayinie and Gebre Egziabher look like. It is not known whether they are ugly or beautiful, tall or short. It is also not known what the impact of their appearance and social environment upon their understanding is. Besides, little is said about their background. There has been no description that shows Gebre Egziabher's relations with his father, mother, friends and the society. No reader for sure can make out what the priests and the nuns' life in the monastery is like. What is missing in Mekonnen's characterization is not the two dimensions only, but also the third one which gives a psychological insight into the characters.

This holds true with Kebede also. His characters are one-dimensional so that they appear very shallow. In Yeketat Maebele no indication is given about Belayneh's background, family life and social interactions. Almost all the time he is found either speaking to himself, listening to Kelile or talking to his servant. Even in his private life his communication is limited only to these two men; so he is completely cut off from society and family. His limited social interaction, moreover, deprives him of practical opportunities to influence the society and the world to make

a god or a superman of himself as he has always wished to become.

What is more, the naming of the characters directly shows that the authors are obsessed with the transmission of their thoughts. The characters' names stand for abstract thoughts; that is to say, they are names taken from the stock of the language that refers to concepts. What the characters do and say and their names have direct relationships. This quality makes the works appear all the more like folktales which are typically identified by these features. Mekonnen's Sewe Bekentu (worthless man), Habteh Yimer (let your wealth be increased), and Kebede's Belayneh that stands for (superpower) and Kelile meaning (preventer) are but some.

Moreover, the movements of Mekonnen's characters and the place they go to reflect a relationship between the philosophy and form. The impact of the writers's philosophy is observed in the settings that are found within the stories. His characters do not have a variety of places to go to. Whenever tired, distressed or in want of consolation, when the character wants to regret and improve, the only place ready-made is either a graveyard or a monastery. The lovers in Tsehay Mesfin stroll not among trees and flowers but among graves and discuss the futility of this world and death. The main character in Yedhotch Ketema when in need of consolation goes to a graveyard and meets ghosts. The

young prince in Salsawi Dawit has hanged a skull in his living room and when in despair often goes to the room to visit this skull. What this shows is that the writer wants people to be heedful of death, one of the elements of his philosophy. Hence, the lovers in Tsehay Mesfin, the rich man in Yedhotch Ketema, the philosophers in Salsawi Dawit are made to have connections with the actual reminders of death.

When the characters move, in addition to going to these odd places, they go to monasteries. Yayinie Abeba in "Alem Weretegna", the king in Yedem Zemen, Taitu in Taitu Bittul, run away to churches and monasteries to seek consolation. This is also in line with the author's belief that propagates religion is worth more than anything else.

Besides, when overburdened by the oddities of life, the alternative asylum for a person is nature. The king's wife in Yedem Zemen when she realizes she is a sinner, runs away into the forest and stays there for the remainder of her life.¹¹⁸ In Joro Tebi the young girl when she is left alone in the world, goes to the forest and continues to live there with the animals. She has accustomed herself to their language and their ways of living. She has lost her parents due to a servant who wants to take their property. This greedy man has stealthily poured water upon her mother and father's bed. To his pleasure, an argument breaks out

¹¹⁸Mekonnen, Yedem Zemen, p. 38.

between the two. They accuse each other of the shameful experience that occurred. Accidentally, the husband kills the wife and shocked by what he has done, kills himself, leaving the young girl by herself. Confused by all this, she has looked for consolation amidst nature.¹¹⁹

The same technique of having characters go to a forest is also repeated in Tsehay Mesfin. Lej Alemu also prefers to go to a forest than to return to the city. Such use of nature has a positive and a negative result. It has a positive result when used realistically because it would be of some value to the writer to magnify his message. However, if used implausibly, it makes the work look like a folktale where reflecting reality as it is, is not a basic requirement. All sorts of unrealistic events can be acceptable in folktales whereas in novels, short stories and plays verisimilitude is something that should be fulfilled or that should be maintained.

In fact, Mekonnen has used such a technique on the part of the characters to claim that innocence is what man should look for. The ever-increasing wickedness of man, he advises, has to be replaced by a kind of simplicity of the heart. With the help of the techniques of parallelism and juxtaposition, his expressions and expectations of what is

¹¹⁹Mekonnen, Joro Tebi (Addis Ababa: n.p., 1951 Eth.C.), p.114.

either good or bad are imparted. The presentation of these two markedly-different lives side by side is of considerable value to the authors as it will assist them in magnifying their beliefs and ideologies; thereby revealing the intensity of their views and feelings.

At times, when he makes his characters go either to nature or a monastery, he makes it unrealistic. For example, in Tsehay Mesfin, the author has made going to the forest appear rather implausible. After Alemu sends his children abroad for further education, he is left without any job for that has been his only job. Unable to decide what to have him do, it seems, or the author without perhaps having no intention of closing the story, Alemu is made all of a sudden to run to the forest. Having no purpose and no job he stays there for many years until his children return. He is used to living with and talking to animals in the forest.¹²⁰ This is unrealistic when viewed from the outer text and, therefore, tinges the novel with a characteristic that belongs to a folktale.

On the other hand, there is also a good use of making the characters learn from nature. The work Yedem Zemen is an example. There is no literal or direct going to the forest. But what is evident is that Weregna Fassil happens to walk by a lake. While stopping there for a moment, he

¹²⁰Mekonnen, Tsehay Mesfin, pp. 80-83.

observes the fish moving and he keeps on wondering about their innocence and simplicity. At this point, without losing resemblance to real life, Mekonnen has been able to impart his message without being unrealistic.¹²¹

¹²¹Mekonnen, Yedem Zemen, p. 78.

CONCLUSION

The practice in Ethiopia is that while plenty of effort is put into the critical appraisal of the content or form of literary works from various angles, very little attention is directed to the possibility that philosophy can be used as a yardstick for literary appreciation. Perhaps the reason for this may be either it is taken for granted or it is believed to be non-existent, or still more it is assumed to be embodied in the study of themes. Whatever the case may be, the reality is that there is no promising development in such matters. However, compared to this, the practice elsewhere is quite different. For example, in the West, as it can be gathered from books, using philosophy as a means for critical analysis is a long-lasting tradition of literary appraisal. Besides always being interested in the exploration of the philosophies of life, critics have been following its progression from time to time. They have been closely studying the works of artists in order to find out the writers' use of philosophy.

Thus, this research, in order to have such a tradition, is designed to study the philosophies of life that exist in the works of Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael. The focus of the study is the dominant philosophy of life discussed in relation to ultimate reality, immortality, time and human nature. What is more, an appraisal of the literary structure is made in line with the study of philosophy. The

extent to which philosophy has influenced the works is also another point of interest.

The study reveals that there is a striking similarity in the kind of philosophies of life the two writers discuss. Although they resemble each other, they are different from their contemporaries. Mekonnen and Kebede are greatly interested in the spiritual purity of the people while Hiruy Wolde Selassie and Germachew Tekle Hawariat are concerned with the specific improvement of social and economic life. It is man and life in general that hold the interest of Mekonnen and Kebede. On the contrary, Hiruy and Germachew worry about the immediate. (see Appendix A). They do not share any view with regard to death, life, fate, man and nature. This suggests that contemporaries do not necessarily reflect the same kind of reality all the time. Even when depicting the same reality, the point of view they hold might vary. As is observed in the similarity between Mekonnen and Kebede on the one hand and in the difference between Hiruy and Germachew on the other, living in the same period does not make writers always focus on the same subject matter and view life from the same perspectives. Although Gerard has not provided specific details, it could be assumed that it is this concentration on the general rather than on the specific that makes him consider Mekonnen and Kebede as writers with "a more detached attitude".

The effort to find out how the Ethio-Italian war affected the two writers' works results in a conclusion which reveals that they are influenced by it. The war has not been the watershed in the life of the people only but it has also been a watershed in the then literary scene. What is meant here is that it has made them present a rather different outlook about civilization. The occurrence of the war has affected them a great deal and made them look for the cause of this evil which in turn has led them to dwell upon civilization and its outcome. What had previously been regarded as just a blessing now appears to be considered a source of evil as well. Moreover, what had been accepted without any doubt before, its importance in all aspects is now questioned and weighed with some sort of doubt. Thenafter, civilization is not taken at face-value any longer; instead it is to be viewed with caution. This kind of a new realization has led Mekonnen to write "Yekayel Dingaye" and Kebede to produce "Atom".

These are works of denunciation of the disadvantage of civilization, particularly the sophistication of war weapons. Man's interest in the production of war weapons has made the writers wonder why man is devoted to the improvement of such destructive tools. Based upon this, they keep on philosophizing about man's nature which they take to be inclined to the glorification of evil rather than good. This preoccupation with the disadvantages of civilization,

together with their pessimistic view about man's nature, has made them different from the writers before them; that is, from writers such as Hiruy Wolde Selassie who raised the positive aspects of civilization by the help of which people can make their life better and Afework Gebre Yesus who did not attempt to question the effect of civilization. (see Appendix A). The discovery of this research then goes in line with Gerard's general comment which points out that the Italian war changed the writers' understanding towards civilization and hence has brought about a discussion of new types of themes. This together with their "detached attitude" makes the researcher call them watersheds in the literary production of that time.

With regard to Mekonnen, his discussion of civilization has been understood differently from what is in the text "Yekayel Dingaye". This recalls the controversial comment that categorizes Mekonnen as anti-progressive. Yimer in his research has pointed out that Mekonnen tries hard to maintain the system where the exploitation of man by man is dominant. To this effect, in his work "Yekayel Dingaye", he is said to suggest that civilization has no significant value at all. He condemns the expansion of civilization because he fears that it could play a part in raising the consciousness of the people; thereby arousing them to fight against the exploiters. Contrary to what Yimer has said, what Mekonnen has been elucidating is the two sides of civilization; that

is, its advantages and disadvantages. As discovered by this researcher and commented on earlier by Kane and Molvare, unhappy about the destruction caused by war, he condemns man's production and use of war weapons that facilitate such results. He is in no way against the positive aspects of civilization. All he is indicating is the uselessness of producing war weapons which he believes is the outcome of the negative side of civilization. He summarizes after his philosophical search that the cause of all the chaos in the world is man himself and his nature. Perhaps Mekonnen, just like Kebede, discusses war, war weapons and man for they were greatly affected by their observation and experience in the **Ethio-Italian war**. A reference to Mekonnen's essay Yedem Minch, which contains his views, provides a justification for what so far has been argued.

It can be assumed that Yimer has made this remark as a result of his dependency on his chosen critical theory, which is the Marxist theory. After having a Marxist frame of reference, he analyzes all Mekonnen's works with the expectation that they will confirm to it. It should be noted that there is nothing wrong in his choice of the critical theory. The reason for this is, as has already been described by Olsen, there are times when the critical theory is useful in gaining insight into the literary works. The trouble lies when there occurs an exaggerated inclination towards it. It is because of such inclination, even when

they refuse to obey, that the critic forces, "Yekayel Dingaye", Yayinie Abeba, "Alem Weretegna" and Yefikir Chorra into the already formed framework. Without being inclined to the chosen theory, the critic could have appreciated some of Mekonnen's works. The works Yedhotch Ketema, Tsehay Mesfin and some part of Yedem Dimtse, since they have some elements of social structure and change, would have been good cases for the chosen frame of reference.

The research indicates that there is a similarity in the kind of philosophical analysis the two writers delve into. While arguing on the same line, they arrive at the same conclusion as well. Although they pick up ideas like death, fate, life and human nature, their discussions are meant to draw people to one direction which is the realization and acceptance of God and his rules. Their dependence upon religion could be attributed to their religious background. (see Appendix A). In addition to this, during their time, religion was so dominant that everything was explained in terms of it. As has been stated by Tena it was a good source of inspiration for writers at that time, and so it was for Mekonnen and Kebede. One may be tempted to ask if their works are religious-oriented where their philosophy lies. Although their philosophies are directed towards religion, until that stage is reached; that is to say, until their discussion turns out to be preaching, there is much room for the philosophical thinking. Even religion itself has a room

for philosophical thinking. It only closes the possibility when it reaches the point of acceptance and preaching. But until that has been attained, the same questions dealing with ultimate reality, good and evil and human nature could be raised.

Besides their religious background, their connection with Western literature can be another source of their ideas. Within the literary and non-literary works of the two writers, for example, the philosopher Diogenes and his views are mentioned.

As far as the relation that exists between the two authors' philosophy and the form of their literary work is concerned, the discovery is that there is considerable connection between them. Mostly, the philosophy is the basis for a large number of their stories. Mekonnen's characters and his plots have a direct relationship to his philosophy. The naming of his characters, the ideas they express and the setting around which they move all reflect his philosophy. The writers' didactic tendency has made their philosophy mechanically shape the form of their literary works.

Though what Gerard has commented concerning the form of the literary works of Mekonnen Endalekachew cannot be accepted wholly, he has a point when he says that there is no social analysis and no psychological insight to make

the works lifelike. These are the exact qualities that his works lack. However, his qualifying them as "abysses of triteness" is objectionable. This is because his technique of juxtaposition and parallelism that play a good role in magnifying his themes are good techniques. His use of dreams as a revelation of the characters' feelings, as a contributor to the plot and as a device for imparting his themes, are certainly qualities to be admired. Looking at this, it cannot be denied that Mekonnen has contributed to development of form in Amharic literature. Regarding, Kebede, as has rightly been commented by Tesfaye Gessesse, he is said to contribute by producing works of poetry with "flawless" rhymes. His use of exact and simple language, which is the result of his classicist tendency, is to be appreciated. It should also be remembered that, as has been stated by Assefa, that Kebede is one of the writers who, because of their introduction to Western literature, started writing good plays.

At last, what this researcher would like to recommend is that since the study of philosophy as reflected in the creative works of other writers is an unexploited area, it requires further research.

What is more, regarding Mekonnen Endalekachew's works, there appears to be confusion in identifying his literary works. For example, the work "Yekayel Dingaye" which is a

short piece of prose or debate has been called, when there is nothing essentially dramatic about it, a play. His Yedem Dimtse has also been referred to as a good play and at other times as mere narrative in verse form. To avoid these and other confusions, research can possibly be conducted to label clearly his works.

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APPENDIX A

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Biographies of Mekonnen

Endalekachew and Kebede Michael

From what can be gathered from Asfaw Atsmat's B.A. Thesis, which is mainly a study of Kebede Michael's life and his theatrical works, Kebede was born in November, 1915. His mother was Woyzero Atsede Michael and his father Ato Ayitaged. At the age of four, he started his education at the traditional church school that was under the church of Saint Gebriel. He studied the Geez language and took lessons in the Psalms in the same language. With the benevolence of the Catholic Cathedral Mission, Kebede began his modern education at the Alliance Francaise in Addis Ababa. However, because of his disagreement with one of the teachers, he left the Alliance Francaise and continued learning at the Lazarist Mission. Later, he returned to the Alliance Francaise where he stayed for quite a few years. It was at the time when Italy invaded Ethiopia that Kebede completed his high school education.

Moreover, Kebede's "university" was his own personal studying. While he was at the Alliance Francaise, he proved himself an excellent learner. His teacher, impressed by his performance, recommended him for further studies in France.

In spite of the late emperor's willingness to send him there, he could not go due to his ill-health. Before he was able to leave, Italy invaded Ethiopia and made his going all the more impossible. Nevertheless, Kebede kept on trying hard to learn more. During the years of the Italian occupation, **he spent most of his days among his books. As he was very** much known for his untiring effort, he succeeded in gaining a lot of knowledge from his personal reading. Besides reading books written in various languages; namely French, English and Italian, he had a careful study of the Bible and the classics. From domestic works, Tena Shale, quoting **Shiferaw Mengesha, said that Kebede admires Hiruy's Wodaje Libbe** and Yoftahe Niguissie's dramatic works. Although **Kebede began composing at an early age, his first collection** of poems entitled Berhane Helina appeared only at the age of eighteen.

In writing the biography of Mekonnen Endalekachew what has served as a source of information is, mainly, the two researches made available by Demisew Bekele and Yimer Kifle. Through these researches it comes to one's knowledge that Mekonnen was born in Shewa at Addisgie in 1883 Eth.C.. When he was ready for school, he began taking lessons which were basically religious-oriented. Although there were no public schools during that time, his being from an aristocratic family enabled him to have private lessons. As a tutor he had the well-educated priest, Aleka Wolde Tsadik.

After some years of such teaching, Mekonnen had to move to Addis Ababa together with his family. Their arrival at Addis Ababa meant an introduction into the royal court. To the younger ones, the court had been more than a family circle. Apart from its being a place for family contacts, more importantly, it had been the "university" from which they could amass significant knowledge. It was a place where Mekonnen was introduced to and instructed in matters of administration, law, tradition and custom.

What is more, Mekonnen without limiting himself to this, pursued his education further. When a new modern high school was opened in the country, he continued his education beginning from 1899 up to 1901 Eth. C. In addition to this formal education, he had informal learning at home. With the help of well-known priests, he had the opportunity to study the Psalms of David, the New Testament and the Amharic language.

Later, Mekonnen, until he died in 1955 at the age of seventy-two, served the country in many ways. At different times he was offered and he carried out government responsibilities both at home and abroad. He was also a patriot who fought against the Italian Fascist aggression. Above all, it should not be forgotten that he was the author of a number of literary and non-literary works.

Books Written by Mekonnen

Endalekachew and Kebede Michael

Among other things, what has most been praised by Mekonnen Endalekachew and Kebede Michael is the art of writing books. The reason for such admiration can be traced **in their qualifying statements that emphasize the usefulness** of books in times of difficulty. Besides their being instructive, books are believed to be the means by the help of which man can fight against mortality. Kebede explains that everything in this world will end. Whether it is his wish or not, man passes away leaving everything behind. **Death is always there to destroy man once and for all.** Kebede, therefore, advises that man has to fight this enemy **by producing immortal books.**

Stressing the unreliability and transient nature of the world, Mekonnen shares his belief that books are the only consolation against this contradictory phenomenon. In times of trouble, books are great friends to turn to. When Mekonnen was unhappy about his relation with the emperor Iyassu and unsuccessful in gaining admiration from the emperor, he said that his only consolation was Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Through the writing of books, one attains peace and leaves for others a very worthwhile guide. At the opening of his collection Arimugne, there is a statement that summarizes his attitude towards books. The statement runs "A book is honey that sweetens the bitterness

of the world."¹²² Besides, Mekonnen also agrees with Kebede's view that advocates the writing of books as a means to gaining immortality.

It can be deduced that it is for this reason that both of them produced a number of books. What they have produced consists not only of literary works but also of works that go beyond fiction. Mekonnen Endalekachew, apart from his fictional works which are mainly novels and plays, has written philosophical essays too. Similarly, Kebede Michael, alongside his literary works that include poems, novels and plays proved his worth by discussing various issues of a considerable magnitude in his essays. From his non-literary works those that are written about religion, civilization, knowledge, economy and history are the notable ones. Besides, he has his own commentary of his literary works.

The literary works they produced are said to be influenced by the writers' introduction to Western literature and their contact with the Bible. As explained by critics, the impact is observable in some of their works. In fact, at times there is clear evidence of the effect when a parallel study is made between the literary works and their origins. For example, Mekonnen's Hassabena Sewe derives its story from the Bible. It is an exact copy of the story of David and Bathsheba.

¹²²Mekonnen, Arimugne, p. 1.

In the same way, Kebede's Akab borrows its story from the story of Akab that is found in the Bible. Within the preface, he has acknowledged that he is imitating the French writer Racine who is known for writing the famous Athaliah and Esther by taking the story from the Bible.¹²³ Besides, from the collection of his poems, there is one, which is wholly about Jonah's prophecy which tells about Jonah's being eaten by a whale, that is well-known to exist in the Bible.¹²⁴

What is more, most of the ideas they discuss and the solutions they suggest are based on the Bible. All the moralistic subjects of their works have their origin in the Bible. Mekonnen most of the time goes to the point of crowding his books with direct quotations from the Bible. His parallelisms, allegories and his symbols have their source in the Bible too. When comparing Mekonnen to his predecessor Hiruy, Thomas Kane points out this feature saying that "Mekonnen resembles Hiruy in his writing style because he uses the justification by means of quotation from the Bible."¹²⁵

The foreign influence is also detectable in some of their works. With regard to Mekonnen, a borrowing from the

¹²³Kebede Michael, Yeketat Maebel (Addis Ababa: Artistic P. Press, 1954 Eth.C.), p. 3.

¹²⁴Kane, p. 146.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 147.

foreign source is observed, as commented on by Kane, in his book Yayinie Abeba. Kane has revealed that the story told by the priest, particularly the story of the gahri driver, has a relation to an Italian story. The story told by Theodosius' son resembles the story of St. Alexius.¹²⁶

The same characteristic holds true for Kebede too. His work Yeketat Maebele has its origin in the Faust story. The other play Yetnbit Ketero is influenced by Sophocles' tragedy which is Oedipus Rex. Besides, the story of the son of the astrologer, his being found in the garden by the king's daughter makes the reader remember the discovery of Paris by the Troy princess Elleni. What all this boils down to is, as Tesfaye Gessesse has pointed out that the writers have had a wide, close reading of foreign literature.¹²⁷

Mekonnen and Kebede's

Contemporaries

A comparative study of Mekonnen and Kebede's philosophies of life with their contemporaries shows that there is a difference. The other writers to use Gerard's words, a critic on Amharic literature, do not appear to be as "detached" as either Mekonnen or Kebede. While there is a similarity between Mekonnen and Kebede, there is no such

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 148.

¹²⁷Ye Ethiopia Tiatir Kemejemerlaw Eske Kebede (Addis Ababa: Ababa University, 1966), p. 27. (Mimeographed).

likeness between Mekonnen and Kebede on the one hand and the others on the other hand. Both Mekonnen and Kebede discuss what life and death are, whether man is full of hope or whether he is doomed to perish, and also whether there is any super-governing force of his life and the world itself. Such kind of philosophical elements are found extensively within their works whereas they are non-existent in the works of Hiruy Wolde Selassie, Germachew Tekle Hawariate and Afework Gebre Yesus.

The preoccupation of these writers appears to be the immediate and the particular rather than the general. Hiruy in his works Addis Alem and Yelib Hassab; Ye Berhanena Ye Tsion Gabecha raises immediate social problems and indicates ways of solving them. Through the main character who has gone abroad and returned home eager to share what he has with his fellow-men, Hiruy propagates the eradication of backward cultural practices and unnecessary religious customs. He advocates the importance of technology and literacy. He also emphasizes the equality of women. Moreover, in Yelib Hassab he sets forward reformist ideas on Marriage, objecting to early marriage. He indicates that arranged marriages are problematic and that the young lovers should know each other well before actually getting married.

The same feature applies to Germachew too. In his work Araya, he portrays a character who is eager to see his

country advanced as the foreign countries he has visited abroad. Besides, just like Hiruy, Germachew believes in marriage between equals. He is also against arranged marriages.

The kind of philosophies existing in the works of Mekonnen and Kebede do not appear in those writers' works. Although they are contemporaries, they view the world from different angles. For Kebede and Mekonnen what matters, is man and his world viewed in general terms. Whereas for the other writers the significant aspect is the immediate social, cultural and political situations. They concern directly themselves about any social institution, or unwanted social practices such as marriage, church rules and literacy. The preoccupation with death, fate and time, human nature and life itself at stake is missing in the works of Hiruy and Germachew.

DECLARATION

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

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