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Rebecca Haile – a New Star in the Ethiopian Literary Firmament

Abstract: It is rather difficult to determine the genre of the book "Held at a distance: my rediscovery of Ethiopia" by Rebecca Haile – it is part travelogue, part history, part memoir but reads like an autobiographical novel. The story is about a young Ethiopian woman who in 1976 was forced to flee to the United States of America with her family during Ethiopia's "Red Terror". Rebecca grew up in Minnesota where her father, professor Getatchew Haile worked at St. John's College as a scientist. After 25 years in the USA Rebecca decided to return to her native country and her visit dislodges so many Western stereotypes of Africa. She admires the great cultural heritage of the ancient times, respects its history and rich civilization. Her insight into Ethiopia is so unique that it reveals her to us as a very talented young writer.

Keywords: Ethiopia, native, homeland, religion, orthodox, history.

Written literature in Ethiopia has a long history. Religious writings in the ancient liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church, ge'ez, constitutes the bulk of the literary production until the late 19th and early 20th century. By contrast, according to studies conducted in the field, Ethiopian literature in the English language came into existence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But this literature written mostly by the Ethiopian Diaspora was not attentively investigated and only now it was possible to investigate some prominent literary writings of the Diaspora in English, published in the

period between 2000 and 2011¹. This literature, as one can see in the book "Held at a distance: my rediscovery of Ethiopia" by Rebecca Haile has to do mainly with the rediscovery of the self.

Rebecca Haile was born into a family of Ethiopian intelligentsia. Her father, Getachew Haile², was born and raised in the Shoa countryside; he overcame his poor rural roots by entering the country's religious school system (Platonov 1991: 221-245), where he excelled and went on to win a state scholarship to study abroad. In the 1950s he earned bachelor's degrees from the Coptic Theological College and the American University in Egypt and then a doctorate in Semitic philology from Tübingen University in Germany. After 11 years abroad he returned to Addis Ababa in 1962. He was only thirty years old, eager to begin building his professional and personal life and to play his part in the broader project of developing a modern Ethiopia. He began teaching at Haile Selassie I (now Addis Ababa) University, and in 1965 was appointed head of the University's Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature. Outside the university, he was closely involved with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which dominated in Ethiopia, and eventually became a confidante of the Patriarch (the head of the Church) and served as the Church's representative to the World's Council of Churches. He was also involved in politics, aligning himself with those who wanted Ethiopia to become a liberal socialist democracy.

He wrote many books and published many articles. Among them: "Beauty of the Creation" (with Misrak Amare), "A History of the First Estifanosite Monks", "The Ge'ez Acts of Abba Estifanos of Gwendagwende".

Rebecca's mother, Misrak Amare, the daughter of an old Addis Ababa family, dropped out of the university in 1964 to marry Rebecca's father and to start a family; within two years Rebecca and her

¹ Other titles of the Ethiopian-American diaspora: Maaze Mengiste "Beneath the Lion's Gaze" (New York 2011), Nega Mezlekia "Notes from Hye-na's Belly" (Toronto 2000) and others.

² Getachew Haile – one of the most prominent Ethiopian scholars of Ethiopian studies specializing in Ge'ez literature.

younger sister Sossina were born. At the time of the coup, her mother worked as a secretary in the local office of Oxford University Press.

For months before and after the coup, Rebecca's parents continued to pursue their personal and professional lives. In 1974, the father was elected to represent the province of Shoa in the Ethiopian Parliament, her family at last moved into a new house they had lovingly designed and built.

One day a terrible thing happened. While the parents were waiting for guests to a small party, called *mels*,³ their neighbour told them that she saw soldiers gathering near their house. It turned out that the *Derg*⁴ had sent soldiers to arrest the father. During the turmoil in front of the house, a soldier shot Getachew Haile. Heavily wounded, Getachew was taken into a military hospital. Thanks to his service in the World Council of Churches Getachew had many contacts outside Ethiopia and the story of his arrest reached the international press and as a result he was transferred to Addis Ababa's Black Lion Hospital.

Within a month after the shooting, Rebecca's parents went to England and then to the USA. Getachew had used a wheelchair ever since he was injured. But despite his heavy illness after six months, with the help of friends and colleagues, he found a position as a cataloguer of Ethiopian manuscripts at St. John's University, a small Catholic university in central Minnesota.

Soon after that the parents took Rebecca with her sister to the USA. Rebecca won a scholarship to attend William's College, then she graduated from Harvard Law School, became a clerk for a federal judge and worked at large law firms in Washington and New York. She met and married Jean, a non-Ethiopian friend. Soon she felt that she eagerly wanted to see her motherland, which she began

³ *Mels* – literally the “homecoming” of the bride during many parties organized by friends and family following the wedding.

⁴ *Derg* – the military junta that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1975. The *Derg* was composed of ca. 120 young military officers, drawn from the main units of the army, air force, navy and police.

to forget. She completely forgot the Amharic language and was afraid that soon she would forget Ethiopia as well.

In May 2001, 25 years after her family was forced to leave their homeland, she persuaded Jean and bought tickets to fly to Ethiopia.

Rebecca's grandmother

Rebecca's grandmother was the head of her extended maternal family: many aunts, uncles and cousins. The grandmother's modest home in the center of Addis Ababa at the main street – Piazza – had been for over 70 years the center of family gatherings: on ordinary Sundays, specific holiday feasts etc. Rebecca loved her grandmother with all her heart and going back to Ethiopia she wondered what she looked like, how many unpleasant marks time left on her extraordinary individuality.

Firstly Rebecca saw the damaged building on the Piazza, which has suffered during the students' demonstrations when government soldiers opened fire at a group of protesters, killing between 40 and 60 students. But when Rebecca and Jean entered the yard, she felt that she had forgotten those damaged buildings, but recognized the whole house of her grandmother and recalled their remarkable last Sunday afternoon. Everything was familiar and quite the same as it had been before! Grandmother was still well although she was nearly 90 years old. She had 6 children and 21 grandchildren (most of them in the USA). She was a great-grandmother of many more, a fixture in her neighbourhood and church community, independent and self-sufficient in nearly every way.

All guests knew Rebecca or her parents, they admired her husband Jean, a non-Ethiopian, half-Greek and half-Armenian. Rebecca felt not as an outsider but felt "embraced with an uncomplicated warmth that took in my *ferenji* (foreigner) husband as well" (Rebecca Haile 2007: 47).

At the end of this chapter she noticed that the feeling of being a lonely American woman left her completely and she understood that her solitude did not mean that she was without such a remarkable grandmother, a true matriarch, as well as history and home. And her home was Ethiopia!

Engineer Tadesse

One of the interesting personages of the book is Rebecca's uncle, Engineer Tadesse.

Despite the unpredictable nature of the *Derg* regime, Engineer Tadesse was determined to bring meaningful and permanent change to this nation. He strongly believed that economic transformation would lead to political change or transformation.

Rebecca's narrative about Engineer Tadesse is unbelievably moving. His determination to continue to live and build bridges in Ethiopia, even under the most trying moments of the *Derg*, is quite exemplary. Surely, every responsible citizen shares his vision of putting the abundant water of the Abbay (Blue Nile) river to large-scale agricultural irrigation development.

Tadesse presented his new proposal entitled "A Proposal for How to Eradicate Hunger in Ethiopia" to the Ethiopian Association of Engineers. One of his slides written in big bold letters reads: "If only [thirty years ago] we had made our slogan water for the tiller instead of land for the tiller, we would not be hungry today!"

What a great privilege it is to encounter such a visionary, dedicated, courageous, selfless, practical person, especially, in our time where individualism reigns. He is a real change agent; he can easily influence the way you think and do things; Rebecca also played her writer's role by effectively depicting the challenging story of Engineer Tadesse in a very artistic and readable manner.

It is quite reasonable that Rebecca devoted enough space to draw Engineer Tadesse's profile. She crafted and narrated it so beautifully that it may affect the thinking of every Ethiopian who reads *Held at a Distance: My Rediscovery of Ethiopia*. It teaches us that an individual can make a meaningful difference even in the midst of unimaginable and deeply disappointing circumstances. Through Tadesse's story, she taught us a lasting lesson about what perseverance meant, and about its reward. One may venture to say that he has succeeded in life, because success is measured by what we leave for others. (Rebecca Haile 2007: 69f.)

The Remains of an Empire

When her parents were in Ethiopia, Rebecca did not get the chance of visiting such remarkably important historical places as Lalibela, Gondar, Lake Tana, and most of all, the city of Aksum which represents an important piece of Ethiopian History.

Lalibela is home to massive monolithic rock that eleventh century masons extracted from solid mountainside; Lake Tana has atmospheric monasteries that depict multiple facets of an age-old church; and in Gondar there are medieval places where kings, courtiers and early Portuguese explorers plotted royal intrigues, Axum the oldest and most important of these places, is also the hardest to categorize. As I would discover, the city is home to an extraordinary mix of ancient ruins, historic churches and present-day tensions that reveals a complex and unsettling picture of the nation and national identity. Two thousand years ago, Axum was at the center of an empire that stretched from northern Ethiopia across the Red Sea to the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Several centuries later Axum witnessed the birth of Ethiopian Christianity and the rise of powerful legends that linked Ethiopia's monarchs to Israel and laid claim to the Ark of the Covenant. The nineteenth-century Axum signified the line the colonial Italians could not cross – the town sits just south of Adwa, the famous battlefield where Emperor Menelik's ragtag army stunned the aggressors in 1896 (Rebecca Haile 2007: 75).

During her visit, Rebecca discovered three distinct strands of Ethiopian identity: *the ancient empire, the Christian kingdom and the divided modern nation*. As I wrote before, Rebecca painted a very bright and unique picture of Ethiopia⁵. Rebecca knew quite well the

⁵ Ethiopia is a country with the most complicated historical and cultural heritage in Africa. It is a cradle of one of the oldest African civilizations, which is evidenced by the artifacts which were preserved from ancient times. Along with Sassanid Iran and Byzantium, the Aksum Empire (the ancient name of Ethiopia), whose development reached its peak in the 3rd-4th century AD, was one of the greatest states of the ancient world, spreading its influence deep into Arabia and the Sudan. The Aksum and pre-

history of Ethiopia and she knew that Ethiopia differed a great deal from other African countries. Originally called Abyssinia, Ethiopia is sub-Saharan Africa's oldest state and its Solomonic dynasty claims descent from King Menelik I, traditionally believed to have been the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. To the ancient world Ethiopia signified all lands south of Egypt. Ethiopia's northern highlands were the site of the empire of Aksum (Axum), established in the 1st century CE), which controlled the Red Sea coast, had cultural contacts with Southern Arabia, Egypt, Rome and Greece. In the 4th century Aksum's Emperor, Ezana, was converted to Christianity and Aksum then used its power to spread Christianity across the central highlands. Later, in the 7th century, Islam penetrated the region from the Red Sea coast and took hold in eastern Ethiopia.

When Haile Selassie I became the Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, the country achieved great success. Haile Selassie, known as "the Lion of Judah", outlawed slavery, created a constitution, began a modern army and an educational system. The program of modernizing Ethiopia had to be paused in 1935 when fascist Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia. In spite of the whole backwardness and the lack of modern weapons, Ethiopia had won this cruel war. Haile Selassie I resumed the throne in 1941 and remained in power until he was overthrown on 12 September 1974 by a military clique (*Derg*).

Ethiopia takes pride in the fact that it never was a European colony and that it has been important to the modern history of Africa as a

Aksum kingdoms left us with beautiful architectural pieces, huge monolithic obelisks, statues cast in gold, silver and bronze and many other artifacts. Writing emerged in Ethiopia as early as the 5th century BC in the Sabeen script; and later, in the 4rd-6th centuries AD it appeared in Ge'ez, The writing system that emerged two and a half thousand years ago was reformed one thousand years later, and since that time it has not undergone any drastic changes, nor have the religious ideology and the cultural orientation. Ethiopia had never been a colony of international powers. Even with the struggle with Italy which had modern weapons at its disposal, Ethiopia was a great winner and it still takes pride in this event. (See Balashova G. A., 2012, *Drama in Modern Ethiopian Literature and Theatre*, Moscow/St. Petersburg: Institute of African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences.

symbol of independence. Its capital, Addis Ababa, was the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the African Union, is also based there, as well as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

The moon over Lake Tana

After Axum, Lalibela, Gondar Rebecca and her husband wanted to visit Lake Tana, a vast, heart-shaped body of water located in north-west Ethiopia. Outside Ethiopia, the lake is known as the source of the Blue Nile, which meets the White Nile several thousand kilometers later. Within Ethiopia the region is also known as an important center of Ethiopian Christianity, a place where monks, monarchs and ordinary men have come from the secular world to see the sanctuary.

On one of the islands in the monastery of St. Gabriel a great library of rare Ethiopian manuscripts collected from the all across Ethiopia was established – the initiator of this endeavour was Emperor Iyasu II (1730-1755). The number of those rare manuscripts was so great that the main part of has not been investigated until now (Bartnicki A., Mantel-Niećko J. 1976: 220). Rebecca remembered her father for whom the Church as an institution had also been crucial. The Church helped him replace rural poverty with the acquisition of complete degrees and university professorship. He fell in love with the ecclesiastical Ge'ez language and liturgy and dedicated his life to the study of its texts and traditions (Rebecca Haile, 2007: 103). During his short service in the post-revolutionary National Parliament, he protested against certain anti-church proposals, such as the proposal of *Derg* veto over the appointment of bishops; this instance of resistance undoubtedly angered Mengistu Haile Mariam and led to the father's arrest. But when he began to look for work outside Ethiopia, in the USA, he had strong support from the international religious network he had established through the years of representing the Church abroad. He found a new home within the Catholic community of Minnesota's St. John's University. His position was: Regents Professor Emeritus of Medieval Studies and Cataloguer of Oriental Manuscripts at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library of Saint John's University.

Having visited so many historical places in Ethiopia, Rebecca clearly understood that the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and the Church were fundamental elements of Ethiopian history and culture, but she also understood that nothing of this sort was true for her. Her parents did not take her and her sister to regular church services, and in fact she was there only twice. And as she grew older, the church felt increasingly distant.

Being in Ethiopia Rebecca always asked herself: “Who am I? I am not a believer in God as practically all the Ethiopians even if I don’t know how to kiss the cross, I am 36 years old, I am a married woman but I don’t have children, I don’t know the Amharic language at all”. But in spite of all these things she feels a strong connection with her country, “she experienced powerful moments of this connection that affirmed this tie, despite the temporal, geographic and cultural distance that caused me so much concern” (Rebecca Haile 2007: 185).

To my mind, “Rediscovery of Ethiopia” is really “The discovery of a real homeland” because Rebecca heard and felt the voice of blood.

Dr. Ayele Bekerie, from Cornell University summarized the key points of the book in the following manner:

Rebecca’s *Held at a Distance: My Rediscovery of Ethiopia* is a well-written, incisive and readable autobiographical, historical, and diasporic narrative. It is indeed a memoir of dislocation, migration, and rediscovery after a revolutionary change. The narrative is based on her four weeks’ trip to her homeland Ethiopia after twenty-five years of absence. Rebecca meticulously narrates how she and her family succeeded in overcoming a traumatic experience and how they rebuilt their immensely productive lives in the Diaspora while they remained connected to their motherland. Her narrative is in fact therapeutic and, hopefully, it will encourage thousands of silenced Ethiopians to voice their sufferings at the hands of the state-sponsored oppressors of the *Derg* period. Rebecca’s initiative in this regard is commendable.⁶

⁶ www.meskot.com [retrieved August 30, 2016]

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