

OROMAY

By Baalu Girma

A Study

Imagery and Meaning

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Introduction

“Roman before him, Fiametta Gilay’s grave behind him, and between them he was left standing. In the end man is alone; he is lonely. He feels loneliness. His heart sings a sad lament. Might there be someone whose heart does not sing a sad lament? Yet we do not want to listen to it. Why? We want to be joyful. To hope is better than to despair and even though we don’t find it, forever we seek it. Everlasting hope; of sadness and of melancholy. What is man without hope? We must inspire hope in our hearts, whether or not there is hope anywhere else.

I want to cry tears

They wrestle with me

Yet from where on earth can tears come!

The bags under my eyes have dried up

Laugh! And laugh again! I’m told

Having laughed, my teeth won’t laugh

Having laughed, crying

My wretched spirit.

The sun has set. The horizon has become red. He stepped on her ring and pushed it with his shoe. Really it was not her ring that he stepped on and

pushed, it was his own life. “Ciao, Fiametta,” he said, from the heart. Her grave was tranquil. Beyond the tranquillity of the grave he heard the gunfire of Nacfa. As he heard the screams of the blood of heroes his heart went there. You love everything; and in the end you lose everything. C’est la vie! Oromai.”

(Pages 371-2)

This is the image with which Bealu Girma leaves us as we read the end of his book, *Oromai*. Oromai! This is the end: “nothing more can be done; all is useless;”¹ or as S’egaye himself defines it:

It means: it’s happened, it’s finished, it’s over.

(Page 288)

The sun is setting for the end of his story, just as it was early morning at the beginning of the story:

Monday daybreak. 19th Tahsas² 1974, a cold and misty morning.

(Page 7)

Also the horizon is red. We now have clarity: we can see the horizon, which we could not

¹ Dictionary definition of ‘Oromai’. **Amharic-English Dictionary**, Kane, Thomas Leiper: Otto Harrassowitz. Weisbaden, Germany. 1990

² Approximately December

do on that first misty morning. The horizon has become red, which reflects the bloodshed that we have been shown throughout the story. Fiametta's grave was tranquil. S'egaye remains standing, still, by the graveside. On the first page the author warned us that we should not hurry:

Don't rush. What is there in the world that makes one rush? Even without rushing, life itself is short.

(Page 5)

However from the very beginning of the story everyone is in a hurry:

As if doomed to it, I woke late.

(Page 7)

Now though, we have come to the end of the story and we have come to a halt; so now we have time to reflect on what we have seen. We can no longer hide behind our wish for joy. We must listen to S'egaye's heart as it sings its sad lament.

We have read the three hundred and seventy previous pages and so the images of S'egaye left standing between Roman Hilleterwerq and Fiametta Gilay's grave, the discarded ring, the gunfire of Nacfa and the screams of the blood of heroes, are all meaningful and evocative for us. So if we want to explore the message that Bealu Girma is trying to convey by means of his book *Oromai*, we must investigate these images. Who is Roman

Hilletwerq and what does she represent? What does the ring represent? Why is S'egaye left alone, lonely, standing between them? What is it that S'egaye has lost? Who is Fiametta Gilay and what does she represent? What does Fiametta's death represent? What do the gunfire at Nacfa and the screams of the blood of heroes represent? These are the questions that I shall try to answer.

Oromayis is a fantastically exciting and evocative book and I hope that this essay will be just a brief introduction to further, more extensive research of this novel in English. There are many themes and sets of imagery that can be explored. Language use, humour, and narrative perspective are three more areas for potential research. This book has been described to me by an Ethiopian as the cultural equivalent to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in English literature. Its being so important to the Ethiopian psyche adds extra urgency to the call for further study.

Overview

Before I start with a detailed examination of these questions I shall give an extremely brief overview of the two principal and concurrent story lines within the novel.

Background

S'egaye Hailemaryam is Chief of Propaganda for the Red Star Multi-Faceted Revolutionary Campaign which has been launched to solve, once and for all the social, economic and political problems in Eritrea. The final stage of the campaign is a military operation to dislodge Eritrea's secessionist rebels from their final stronghold at the town of Nacfa, a mountainous natural fort.

First Storyline

S'egaye leaves Addis Ababa for Asmara. He works very hard and the campaign is ostensibly a success. He then accompanies the military to cover the battle for Nacfa. The mission of the battalion, which he chooses to join, is to take the strategic Hill 1702. Initially they take Hill 1702, although with great loss of life. However, the next day, the secessionist rebels counter-attack and the battalion is faced with either withdrawing from Hill 1702 or

being surrounded and wiped out. S'egaye leaves but the rest of the battalion remain to fight to the death. S'egaye feels disgust at the horrors of war. He feels guilt and disgust that the battalion had sacrificed themselves for the increasingly hopeless ideal of a united Ethiopia and that he had abandoned them.

Second Storyline

S'egaye leaves his fiancée, Roman, for Asmara and the Red Star Campaign. He meets Fiametta Gilay and they fall in love. She behaves strangely and they argue. He finds what he thinks is proof that she has betrayed him. In the end however she sacrifices herself so that he might not be killed. Roman leaves him when she sees that she has lost his heart. He feels sickened and betrayed by Fiametta's apparent dishonesty. He feels guilt that Fiametta sacrificed herself so that he might live and disgust at a state of affairs that could lead to her death. He feels that his vows to Roman were worthless.

Comparison

There are obvious parallels between these two storylines, which I shall explore in detail. However, to summarize, the first storyline deals with S'egaye's allegiance to Revolutionary Ethiopia and his belief in the Red Star Campaign. The second storyline deals with his allegiance to Roman and his love of Fiametta. The first deals with philosophical conflict; the second reflects an equivalent emotional conflict. Both conflicts end in disillusionment and revulsion.

S'egaye's Vows

Roman Hiletewerq

Roman appears at the beginning of *Oromai*, when she goes with S'egaye to the airport. Then however we do not see her again in person until the end of the novel, when she comes to visit S'egaye at the time he returns to Asmara from the battle for Nacfa. However she does have a constant influence throughout the story on the main protagonists, S'egaye and Fiametta, whether it be through her phone calls or through a reference to her in a discussion or through S'egaye's remembrance of her at different times.

While S'egaye and Fiametta are driving to the airport, S'egaye tells how he met Roman. He said that he initially avoided her because she was too religious:

Whenever I saw her, it was always the Bible, that never left her hand, which would chase me off from afar

(Page 12)

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is central to understanding the identity of Ethiopia and so an image of Roman always with a Bible identifies her immediately with her country. Then, when Fiametta sees that S'egaye wears a ring and asks him whether he is married, S'egaye

describes Roman as an Amhara Rose (*Yämāhal agär s'igeräd*¹ (Page 231)). This image again identifies her strongly with a place, this time with the area around Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The third image that defines Roman is of her performing the traditional Ethiopian Coffee ceremony (Pages 264-5). When he describes this, S'egaye is reminiscing about Roman, as he speaks to her on the phone, just after his relationship with Fiametta starts to crumble.

These three very strong images would suggest that Roman represents a traditional Ethiopia and its values. So, with this in mind, it must be noted what Roman thinks of the Red Star Campaign. In the car on the way to the airport Roman shows her disapproval of any sort of campaign:

With every dawn another campaign. A campaign calling for harmonious development. A campaign for warfare. An economic reinforcement campaign. A campaign to eradicate illiteracy. A discipline campaign. Also now, a campaign to solve the Eritrea problem. We've created a tradition of campaigns. When will the day come when we can live and die without campaigns?..... Don't you reckon that all of Ethiopia's problems have descended upon us in proclamations and campaigns like a thick fog²?

(Pages 9-10)

¹ This literally translates as 'rose of the middle land'. The middle land refers to the Central Highlands of Ethiopia where Addis Ababa and the homelands of the Amhara tribe are situated.

² Here we have another image which gives further meaning to the "hazy and misty morning" (Page 7).

Then near the end of the novel she tells of the affect the campaign has had on her:

“When will this campaign be over?” she asked me.

“Dunno; I really don’t know.”

“It’s a mess, my love. Surely God is punishing me”, she said

(Page 345)

Why does Roman dislike this particular campaign so much? She provides us with the answer, at the beginning of the novel:

Any place where you lay your head is your home. You get used to it. I’m scared that you’ll give my love away to someone else.

(Page 15)

And again towards the end:

You’re at home in whatever place you go to. You take to wherever it is that you end up.

(Page 347)

She is afraid that S’egaye will get used to another place, and fall in love with someone else.

He does. Her final words are:

I don't know why men whom I love betray me! It seems that it's my fate to lose those whom I have found. Ciao.

(Page 371)

If we are to say that Roman represents Ethiopia and its values, we can understand why she might be afraid that a foreign land, with foreign values, might seduce S'egaye. Especially since, as S'egaye himself admits, the origin of love is habit:

We really started to get used to one another. Anyway, the origin of love is habit.

(Page 256)

Since Roman refers to 'the men whom I love' (*yämiwäddaçcäw wändoçcê*), the next question that might be asked is who else has betrayed traditional Ethiopia and her values? An obvious answer would be Eritrea or the Eritreans and any other rebellious ethnic grouping, for instance the Somalis in the Ogaden. This time however the tragedy is the greatest because it is her own people, the Amhara, personified as S'egaye, whom she has lost.

The Ring

She took their engagement ring from her finger and tossed it at his feet.

(Pages 370-1)

An engagement ring signifies the engagement vows. After S'egaye and Fiametta had spent several weeks enjoying the bliss of their love, and when, after Roman's phone call, Fiametta is then angry with him, S'egaye laments the mess that he has got himself into:

How is it possible that my wretched old heart can love two women equally?..... I felt my heart bleeding. The vow that I had sworn pricked me like a thorn. Worse still it wrung my bleeding heart because love and happiness, which I found anew in the shade of the palm trees¹, were likewise not easily forgotten.

(Page268)

He feels that the vows, which he has made to Roman, 'prick him like a thorn'. He cannot escape the vows nor can he leave Fiametta. Then, just before S'egaye goes to the battlefield, Fiametta finds a cassette tape that Roman has sent him. She rips it to shreds and scatters it on his face (Page 281). Ripping up a contract is a well-used cliché and the image and symbolism of Fiametta ripping up of Roman's tape is very similar. She is ripping up their contract, their engagement vows.

When S'egaye returns from Nacfa, he takes a bath. He has just experienced the horrors of war and he has found proof of what he thinks is Fiametta's betrayal of him. He is symbolically washing himself of both the sins of war and of Fiametta:

¹ For discussion on the image of palm trees refer to pages 51-2.

It was just as if I were washing away the sins of war that I scrubbed and rubbed clean my body. And I washed away Fiametta Gilay too, like filth, from myself.

(Page 340)

At this point S'egaye actually feels that he is lucky. Roman has come to Asmara to see him. Whatever else goes wrong in his life, S'egaye can fall back on Roman:

And I thanked my luck because Romi had come..... Life hadn't treated me too badly. I was happy that my Romi had come in the nick of time. I'm glad when life thinks to make amends.

(Page 341)

Now he believes that his vows and his allegiance to Roman have saved him from the horror and betrayal of life.

There is a common theme throughout the novel that foreign influence is bad thing. The main point in Solomon's lengthy account of the political history of Eritrea (Pages 77-86) is that the British sowed the seeds of secessionism and turmoil in Eritrea. During S'egaye's first conversation with Fiametta he notes the continuing influence of the Italian colonialists in Eritrea:

Asmara's roads, shops, bars, hotels and restaurants, as well as factories, are all called by foreign names. The Italian legacy doesn't just give rise to that foreign

mentality and perspective. A cultural revolution needs to be undertaken in this region.

(Page 93)

In his assertion of the necessity of a cultural revolution in Eritrea, he demonstrates the importance that he places on a nation's identity. Thus, he is also asserting the allegiance he has to his own cultural identity. There is another recurring theme that demonstrates this point: pasta:

I hope that it's not good old "pasta of the day"...

(Page 170)

S'egaye doesn't want to eat pasta when he dines with the "Chairman", the Ethiopian head of state. It is a foreign food. One of Solomon Betre Giorgis' hobbies is cooking *wät'*, Ethiopian stew. This is a symbol of Solomon's 'Ethiopian-ness'. Nevertheless after S'egaye meets Fiametta on the beach in Massawa, when they begin to fall in love, they go to a restaurant and eat *foreign* food before they return to the beach and kiss for the first time:

The food we ordered for dinner was *consumi di brodo, tivi in bianco bollito con mayonnaise, salata verdi and pane di Spagna with cold vino bianco bertoli*. It was simple but magnificent food. It was Fiametta's choice.

(Page 204)

The names of those dishes cannot even be transliterated properly into Ethiopic script. This meal was Fiametta's choice. He describes the meal as magnificent (*grum*). Just as Roman predicted, S'egaye is increasingly seduced by alien (*ba'idan*) influences. He describes all the foreign foods he eats during the period when he and Fiametta most enjoy their love for each other. Also, when S'egaye is talking to Roman on the phone just after having reminisced about her performing the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony, he tries to persuade her that he is not enjoying himself too much in Asmara because he is working a lot and he has to eat too much pasta as well:

All's well except that there's a lot of work... Everywhere has started to smell of pasta. I'm looking like pasta too.

(Page 265)

The next set of images, which suggest S'egaye's allegiance his country, is of journalist as soldier. Bealu Girma comments on and criticizes journalists and journalism through the mouths of several characters throughout *Oromay*. This subject alone could be a topic of further study. S'egaye is Chief of Propaganda and he takes his job very seriously. His identity is strongly linked with his profession as a journalist: during the same telephone conversation with Roman, which contains the images of the coffee ceremony and S'egaye's looking like pasta (Pages 265-6), he likens a journalist to a soldier:

And a journalist is a soldier as much as he can be. A soldier shoots; a journalist writes history. In their own way both fight...

Again, when S'egaye is sitting with his childhood friend Colonel Tariku, drinking whisky, just before the battle for Nacfa, he asks Tariku's permission to join his Battalion at the attack on Hill 1702. As a preface to his request, S'egaye writes:

The war is a journalist's war too. I have come to record history.

(Page 396)

Then when he is persuading Tariku's senior officer to allow him to accompany the battalion S'egaye says:

Hill 1702 carried on arousing fierce and fervent emotions in me, as it did for Colonel Tariku and for the members of the Red Tulip Army. Their zeal had become my zeal; their dream had become my dream. Their victory will be my victory.

Their death, my death. Day and night, whether I'm awake or asleep, I've begun to see myself standing on the summit of Hill 1702. Hill 1702 has become almost second nature to me.

(Page 301-2)

This is an extremely strong statement from S'egaye, especially since it is directed to the reader during the conversations rather than as direct speech to the officer. A soldier makes

the ultimate vow to his country: he vows that he will die for his country. Thus S'egaye makes an equal pledge, through his uniting of his own vocation with the soldiers'.

Having highlighted a few very different images that demonstrate the strength of S'egaye's allegiance to his country, we will now return to the scene by Fiametta's grave. Roman, who represents traditional Ethiopia throws her engagement ring, which represents S'egaye's pledge of allegiance to Ethiopia, at his feet and walks away. He is even more than a character that has betrayed and shunned his fiancée and is left standing alone with nothing, as the woman, for whom he betrayed her, lies dead in a grave next to him. Now we can see S'egaye, the man who has betrayed and shunned his country. The ring with which he plays with his foot is his life because it was his vow to Roman, or Ethiopia. In the past, he could fall back on this when he needed to restore meaning and purpose in his life. However S'egaye has done everything he can to further the objectives of Revolutionary Ethiopia, and in doing so has betrayed the essence of what it means to be Ethiopian. His comrades, some of the leading officials in Revolutionary Ethiopia, have come to Fiametta's funeral and they laud Fiametta as an example to them all. Solomon says:

It seems to me that the day is coming when many of us will be sacrificed, not for the mistakes of others, but for the sake of their lives and happiness. She, going before us, leaves us a good example. It is a good beginning.

(Page 369)

It is even “a good beginning”, which is an irony at the end of S'egaye's story, at the end of

Bealu Girma's book, when all is lost: Oromai! The officials of Revolutionary Ethiopia might perhaps see it as a beginning but it is the end for S'egaye and the author.

Who or what led him to betray his allegiance and vows? I now turn to Fiametta Gilay.

Fiametta Gilay

What kind of woman am I?

(Pages 157, 201, 205, 232, 236, 253, 352, 358, 360, 361)

This is Fiametta's constant refrain and it is the same question that I am asking in this section. Of the last twenty-one pages of *Oromay* almost eleven are Fiametta's final letter to S'egaye; one tells of Fiametta's death; and four are set around Fiametta's grave. This leaves only five pages for the author to tie up all the other loose ends of the story, in the shadow of her murder. It is only at Fiametta's graveside that we could possibly realize the extent and poignancy of the very last image of the novel, which are the gunfire of Nacfa and the screams of the blood of heroes. Fiametta Gilay is the key with which the author opens the reader's hearts and minds to the message that he is trying to convey, to the moral of the story. Fiametta is the reason Roman walks away from S'egaye. Fiametta is the only person who stays with S'egaye, although she is dead, although her little flame is extinguished (*tinishwa nübälbäl t'äfach* (Page 362)). S'egaye's heart is with Fiametta in her grave, and she lives on in his thoughts:

“... Yes, I'll remember her. She'll live on in my thoughts. What else can I do for her? I didn't go to the grave together with her...”

“But your heart has gone to her grave...”

(Page 370)

Throughout the novel the reader, along with Fiametta herself, must ask what kind of

woman she is. She is a complex character. If I were to explore Fiametta's character fully I would have to deal with, amongst others and in no particular order, the themes of vanity, permanence, transience, love, lust, danger, the past, the future, lying, delusion, peace, corruption, nationality, patriotism, prophecy, inevitability, beauty, sadness, happiness, tradition, alienation, victory, revenge, salvation, politics, progress, cruelty, unity, good and evil. If I were to explore Fiametta's character fully, I would have to deal, amongst others and in no particular order, the images of teeth, the sea, salt, milk, honey, a flame, a lantern, fine clothes, jewellery, a princess, a dove, a thief, the devil, palm trees, the moon, the sun, an old man, an mad old woman, fireworks, a city, a tourist, a red star and the beautiful bride of the Angel of Death. Indeed, these are the themes and images of the whole novel. I shall try to capture the essence of Fiametta and her significance to the novel by concentrating on what I consider to be the two most powerful and telling images with which Bealu Girma provides us, and in doing so I will inevitably touch upon many of the others.

The White Dove Of The Red Sea

The scene is the Gurgusum tented city on the coast at Massawa. It is the eve of the Massawa Festival. S'egaye doesn't want to sleep and so goes in search of his journalist friends. People are singing, in Tigrigna, in Amharic, in Oromo, in Gurage, and they are all dancing. Even the stars seem to be dancing happily in the night sky. The air is fresh. There are bonfires everywhere, which reflect on the waves of the Red Sea.

I saw a girl alone, sitting on a flat rock looking into the distance- to the horizon

where the sky and the sea kiss. The sea washed the rock that she was sitting on. The cool sea air was lifting and flicking her hair. She was wearing a short summer dress, which hung from her round shoulders by a slender strap, exposing her back. She appeared to me like a white dove worshipping the God of the Sea. "If only I had my camera," I said to myself. As the fireworks suddenly exploded on the dark sky from the tented village, several thousands of flowers fell on the darkness.

(Page 200)

The girl is of course Fiametta Gilay. In this scene several images allude to themes that run throughout the novel:

- The dove is a common symbol in Christianity for peace.
- The Red Sea is strongly associated with Eritrea (and is strategically important to Ethiopia).
- The fireworks and noise and fires, especially when juxtaposed with the image of the dove, might well be seen as a metaphor for the bombs, screams and tented camps of a war. Also the singing in many Ethiopian languages implies the national unity for the sake of which that gruesome battle will soon be fought.
- The breeze flicking her hair alludes to Fiametta constantly flicking her own hair while she speaks.
- The images, of the sky and the sea kissing and of the short white summer dress hanging from her round shoulders by a slender strap while the cool sea breeze caresses her skin, are extremely sensual and sexual. However since she is sitting on a rock lapped by the waves, this sensual and sexual image transforms into the image

of a temptress luring the innocent sailor to his death as his ship breaks up on her rock.

According to the tradition more familiar to a Western European, the white dove, which comes bearing the olive branch in the biblical story of Noah, has come to symbolize peace. This is the same in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition except that the dove carries a palm frond. From the moment S'egaye arrives in Asmara he describes the palm trees. He associates Asmara with the palm trees that line its avenues; and he associates the beautiful women of Asmara (*shurubewoch*, which refers to their braided hair), with the palm trees:

Leaning, fallen and swaying, the palm trees which are seen along each street and the beautiful northern girls with braided hair stir the emotions, even if they are not poets facing noble beauty.

(Page 25)

This imagery continues throughout the book:

The palm trees seemed to me to be all enveloped in their own particular charm. Asmara's "*shurubewoch*" seem to have come out and been paraded along the streets- the palm trees.

(Page 245)

There are many other places in the novel where palm trees and "*shurubewoch*" are used or

mentioned. Just as the palm trees have a permanent association with Asmara, so Fiametta does as well, especially in the mind of S'egaye:

O my Asmara, my beautiful town of palm trees, *natay sāmenawit s'ibqiti*¹, as I leave you behind me and go, my heart is burdened with sadness and begins to weigh upon me like a rock. I have fallen in love with Asmara. What surprises me is that I do not see Asmara and Fiametta Gilay separately.

(Pages 285-6)

He says this as he leaves Asmara for the battle at Nacfa. We can again note the juxtaposition of Asmara's palm trees, with their intimation of peace, and a journey to war.

Such is Fiametta's association with a white dove, peace, palm trees, and Asmara. Next we shall see the important link between Eritrea and the Red Sea. Most of the imagery to do with the sea and salt is in the same part of the story, from which I have quoted above, when S'egaye and Fiametta meet by chance, fall in love and have their first kiss. For instance, S'egaye says that the sea sings the music of love and Fiametta says that man's feelings are salty like the sea (Page 205). Nevertheless, Firew Zerihun does describe the woman of Asmara as *yāmidir ch'äw*, salt of the ground, in his tirade against the behaviour and motives of Asmaran women and Fiametta in particular (Pages 271-274).

¹ This phrase is in Tigrigna, rather than Amharic, and so I leave it thus.

Eritrea's longest border is with the sea; and without Eritrea, Ethiopia is a land-locked country. The strategic importance of Eritrea to Ethiopia is obvious if it is only on account of this one factor. Solomon confirms this:

For the past four hundred years Ethiopia has never rejoiced at this, her gateway to the sea. It's at the Red Sea that she still bleeds. On the other hand, it's useful to know how much the Red Sea is necessary for our existence- our life, our breath.

(Page 190)

The "Chairman" also speaks in the same vein but in much more ornate language in his speech to the people of all Ethiopia from Asmara (Page 173).

One of the most powerful (or maybe most clichéd) images in the book occurs when S'egaye first gets to Massawa. He is exploring the city alone and he describes to the reader a terrible battle, which had taken place four years beforehand in Massawa between the EPLF¹ and the Ethiopian Army. In the sand at the scene of the battle he finds two human skulls and he cannot differentiate between them:

Which one is which? I can't tell the one from the other. They were both the skulls

¹ Eritrean People's Liberation Front

of Ethiopians, which had one kind of shape.

(Page 187)

Unity between Eritrea and Ethiopia is the *raison d'être* of the Red Star Campaign: the secessionists are its principle enemy. This might, on one hand, be for strategic and commercial reasons, but to S'egaye and to others it also because of the ancestral historic and cultural unity of Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Brigadier-General who gives a briefing before the battle of Nacfa sums up the conflict inherent in fighting one's own people:

And both of us, we are the children of one Ethiopia who in spirit understand each other. It is unfortunate. It is because of this that this war is so very distressing, so very bitter and cruel.

(Page 293)

In the aftermath of the battle for Hill 1702 S'egaye loses his rationality. His friend had been shot and he sees the horror of a battle, which he blames on the Eritrean rebels. However, even then Colonel Tariku, the warrior, reminds him that these are his own people:

"It's not the fault of these poor devils; instead it's unfortunate. In another time and place we would laugh and chat with these people like they were brothers.

(Page 325)

S'egaye also realizes that the campaign against the Eritrean secessionists cannot be justified

on any spurious political grounds. When he is talking to Colonel Betru Tesema about whether Se'lay Berahi's defection is genuine or not, Colonel Betru is surprised when S'egaye finds himself agreeing with Se'lay in that the war is not a campaign against imperialism because Eritrea is not a colony and, to add to this, it is not a civil war for political change, like in France or Russia, because they are not aiming for political change. He even goes so far as to say:

In short, I only respect those who say that there is no place for narrow-mindedness swollen by arrogance.

(Page 178)

Thus, he suggests, of course, that there exists just such narrow-mindedness within this campaign. Nevertheless there must be an overall benefit to be gained by the ending of Ethiopia's problems in Eritrea, the defeat of the Eritrean rebels and the realisation of true unity between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Even Se'lay Berahi, the novel's antagonist, describes the continuing suffering of the Eritrean people despite his complicity in the protraction of the conflict:

People have left their homes and gone into exile. They have been imprisoned. They have been murdered. They have died and been left in every desert. They endure lives of misery in foreign countries; suffer; wander aimlessly. What has been created? Nothing. As for freedom, as they draw toward it, it has got further and further away, like the North Star. And what have we ever given them other

than a distant hope? And now, it doesn't surprise me if the people want peace, if they detest us and betray us.

(Page 220)

On whatever basis the campaign is justified, S'egaye himself, in his support for the Revolution, is striving for the improvement and benefit of the conditions of all the people of a unified Revolutionary Ethiopia. The benefit he envisages from the Red Star Campaign is peace and this is a major improvement, especially for the Eritrean people. Other characters are in Eritrea for their own benefit, like Mes'hafe Daniel whom S'egaye reprimands severely for not airing his concerns about the campaign and the economy during a meeting with the "Chairman":

Neither this revolution, nor any project, is an activity or responsibility of a few people. There is an equal responsibility and obligation upon everyone who cries "My Revolution!" or "My Country!"

(Pages 75-6)

When S'egaye is in a good mood one day and says that he is in love, Fiametta asks him "With whom?" S'egaye answers "With Asmara" (Page 257), rather than the obvious answer of "Fiametta". I suggest that although both the answer he gave and the more straightforward answer would be correct. If we are to look deeper into the meaning of the imagery, S'egaye is really in love with the idea of peace. He is in love with only the idea of peace because he has not seen the reality of peace. I suggest that, just as Roman represents

traditional Ethiopia and the ring represents S'egaye's' vow of allegiance to Ethiopia, Fiametta Gilay is the White Dove of the Red Sea because she represents peace in Eritrea. However this is only one side of Fiametta. I shall discuss the wind flicking her hair and the beautiful temptress on the rocks, after I have introduced a new image in the next section.

The Lantern

“I’m called Fiametta,” she said, telling me her name. Her name startled me and, looking me up and down, she said, “What is it?”

“It’s a foreign name....”

“It’s an Italian name....”

“What does it mean?”

“Small flame...”

“Really? It’s best to keep away from you.” I said

“Why?” She said to me

“It’s said that an angel gives a name. It’s dangerous if you’re like your name. It’s not good to have been burnt by a small flame. I hope that you’re not like your name.” I said to her.

“I am, damn it,” she laughed.

.....

“If you hate Fiametta, call me a lantern¹” she said and was quiet.

(Page 92-3)

This short conversation again emphasizes the distrust that S’egaye, as a loyal Ethiopian, has for the foreign, and it further links Fiametta with the concept of foreign influence.

However, it is the images of the small flame and the lantern on which I shall be concentrating in this section

The image of a flame has contradictory connotations that are entirely fitting for the essence of Fiametta’s character, which, like a flame, is so difficult to pin down. The two properties of a flame are heat and light. Heat is necessary for life and is warming but heat burns and causes pain and destruction. Light allows us to see but with the light comes an unavoidable shadow. A little flame is also fragile and it flicks around in a breeze like Fiametta’s hair in the breeze by the sea. This flicking of the hair in the breeze and the flicking flame also mirror the way Fiametta very often flicks her hair while she is speaking (“Her smile wavered (?) as she flicked her hair.” (Page 92) is one of very many examples). This suggests vanity. Fiametta’s vanity is also shown in that she is always cleaning her teeth²:

¹ The Amharic word *fana* which means ‘lantern, lamp, torch’ is the second half of the phrase which means lighthouse, *barmama fana*. There is also a word *fanno* which means outlaw, from *fannänä*; the grammatically logical feminine variant of *fanno* would be *fanna*. These would be appropriate to Fiyameta.

²The author uses teeth in his imagery several times throughout *Oromai*. See pgs34, 90, 156, 201, 243, 254, 256, 258 and others.

Quietly, she began brushing her teeth. The brush doesn't stray from her hand, doesn't part from her teeth. It's an art, the way she brushes her teeth.

(Page 254)

Her vanity manifests itself in her passion for clothes and jewellery as well. Even when she was in prison she adorned herself with the garlands of yellow spring flowers that are used in the feast of the Invention of the Cross (*Mäsk'äl*), in September (17 *Mäskäräm*):

She would collect *Mäsk'äl* flowers that had grown within the compound, make earrings, necklaces and bracelets and adorn herself with them. All the prisoners would call her "Your Highness Fiametta." She would be decorated like this and really seem like a princess sitting on the floor, which she had covered with rushes. And it seems to me that she knew this. She would make a crown of *Mäsk'äl* flowers and place it upon her head.

(Page 130)

Vanity suggests a fragility of the spirit, which mirrors the fragility of the little flame. This fragility of spirit also burns. Fiametta says of herself, as she and S'egaye get to know each other better, that she makes men sprout horns ("I make men sprout horns" (Page 236)). Firew Zerihun's lengthy tirade to S'egaye about how all Asmara women, and especially Fiametta, torment and use Amhara man for their own benefit (Pages 271-4), describes a lot of characteristics that are shown in Fiametta's behaviour. He even repeats the image of the

horns, twice, firstly in relation to Asmaran women in general and than in relation to Fiametta in particular:

They make you jealous and strive to make you sprout horns,...

(Page 273)

And:

She has made many Amhara men sprout horns, has shattered [their] marriages and has made [them] draw [their] pistols on each other

(Page 274)

Even Se'lay Berahi ratifies her pedigree as an easy woman, just after Fiametta and S'egaye meet:

You're the same Fiametta of old. You haven't changed at all. And now it's a famous man who has captured your heart.

(Page 137)

This is where the image of the beautiful temptress sitting on the rock by the Red Sea fits in. S'egaye doesn't want to believe it; and the reader, as he identifies with S'egaye, also doesn't want it to be true. Fiametta seems to have fooled S'egaye into what Firew Zerihun describes as false love (*yäwīshät fik'ir* (Page 271)) and she seems to be using him for her

own ends. When S'egaye reads the message, which Colonel Tariku gave him at Hill 1702 to open if he died (Page 334), it confirms S'egaye's suspicion about his having had a relationship with Fiametta, even though she had expressly denied it (Page 256). This, in turn, confirms S'egaye's suspicions, seeded by Firew Zerihun, that Fiametta is not genuine in her love for him. S'egaye feels intense emotional pain:

Heaven will surely hear the bitter screams of my heart.

(Page 334)

This pain, this bitter scream of S'egaye's heart, is a result of a burn from Fiametta's flame and it is the cry of the tempted sailors as their ship hits the rocks and the screams of the Ethiopian soldiers on Hill 1702.

Despite all of this, there are clues that Fiametta Gilay is not just a temptress and a burning flame. S'egaye feels that Fiametta's incessant lying does not stem from badness of spirit, but just from habit (maybe in the same way that love is just habit):

And which is the truth in what she speaks? Which the lie? It's difficult ever to distinguish. So then, it's bad habit, her behaving like this- not spite.

(Page 261)

There is a definite contradictory force that controls her behaviour. For instance, when Fiametta tells S'egaye that she prefers married or engaged men as lovers, S'egaye asks her

the reason; her answer could be rephrased as “because I like to suffer”:

Oromai. I’m happy. I get stubborn. When I get stubborn, I suffer. And I like it

(Page 232)

When someone suffers over a long period of time, they become inured to it because it becomes all they know and remember. It becomes a fundamental part of their identity. Suffering is painful but it is, in a perverse way, safe. In this way, suffering has become a habit for Fiametta, and so too her lying and her persistent contrariness. Fiametta is thus portrayed as a victim. This is also revealed in the story about how she was tricked into losing her virginity, forced into marriage, then how she had a miscarriage and got divorced (Pages 234-236). Again Fiametta is a victim in her story of how her friend plotted that she should sleep with an official of the regime, a relative of the friend. She also says to S’egaye that she no longer has happiness in her heart as she did before:

But now I have neither happiness nor peace. My heart just grieves. Sometimes it tells me: “Cry, cry!” I didn’t used to be like this, damn it. What’s the matter with me though?

(Page 258)

On the final occasion on which they spend time together S’egaye describes how Fiametta has appeared to him recently:

Recently her joking and her laughter have vanished and she has seemed like a stranger from sad land.

(Page 279)

Now we can return to the association between Fiametta and Eritrea. Eritrea has suffered for a many years under the Italian and British colonisation and under mismanagement and terror between 1967 A.M. and 1971 A.M. (see page 252) and it is still suffering from all of this. So we have Fiametta, or Eritrea, who is fragile, vain, capricious, contrary, suffering and victimised, but who still seduces Amhara men, the rulers of Ethiopia. We have the fragile flame that burns. It is the dangerous shadow of this flame that attracts S'egaye:

And besides love, the shadow of danger that stretches out over the life of Fiametta has bred compassion within me.

(Page 268)

Light however is the key to the significance of Fiametta's character. When we, and S'egaye, first encounter her, she says: "Call me a lantern." She is a lantern that allows S'egaye to see the truth about all that is happening around him. It was she who described the Red Star Campaign as anarchy (*igirrigirr* (Page 93)) when they first met. It was she who doubted that Nacfa would fall in the three months allotted for the campaign; and it is she who described what is destroying Eritrea as "Amhara boasts and Hamasein lies"¹

¹ Hamasein is the province within Eritrea of which Asmara is also the capital.

(yamara gurranna yähamasen wīshāt (Page 249)). It was she who told him that they would not meet again after he got back from Nacfa. However it is only after S'egaye has been burnt by her flame, after he has vowed to see her only to deliver Tariku's message and to say goodbye forever, that she can show him the truth, or she can shine the lantern on the folly of the Revolution, in which he has believed entirely, and of the corruption of the ruling elite.

As she sits in her office watched over by her soon to be murderer, she writes a letter to him, in which she opens up her heart. This letter's importance is confirmed as it takes up eleven of the last twenty-one pages (Pages 350-361). She describes three kinds of Amhara men with whom she has had relationships. She says she has tormented them and observed their reactions:

When I was with them too, I didn't afford them peace of mind. Calling out the names of the men whom I'd known before and alluding to their reputation, their kindness, their power, and their virility, I'd make them jealous. It means that from then on they learn of the fire of love and of jealousy.

(Page 353)

She sees three reactions from the men whom she torments: the men who will say anything but are only motivated by the jealous desire not to see her with any other man: the men who shower her with money and gifts to the detriment of their families in Ethiopia (she takes full advantage of their recklessness): and the men who use brutality to keep her under

control. The echo between the actions of these men and the treatment of Eritrea by the Ethiopian authorities is exact. Bealu Girma's realization of the character of Fiametta here is again a precise comment on the political conflict.

The reality of the situation cannot enter S'egaye's consciousness through his eyes and his brain, it has to enter through his heart. Fiametta continues her letter and brings the two opposing spheres of politics and love together:

What perverts politics is investing with authority those men who are afflicted with lust, materialism¹, bragging, foolhardy conceit, and a desire for authority. If the Red Star Campaign takes this matter into consideration, it seems good to me. I don't know politics. I don't want to know. The only thing that I know is love.

(Page 356)

She goes on to write that the women of Asmara torment and use officials of the regime because they come intending to torment and use the women. S'egaye escapes all of this criticism:

You are not one who is to be made a fool of, or who craves only your own transient pleasure like the other men, or I don't think you are. I reckon that it is because everything that you do comes from a pure heart and an honest mind.

¹ literally: property love- "*fiqir niway*"

S'egaye has been burnt by Fiametta's flame and has now been shown, by its light, to be pure.

The tragedy in this situation is that Fiametta has not been able, until the very last, to make up her mind about which side of the "Amhara boasts and the Hamasein lies" she should support. She declares to Se'lay her indifference to the Eritrean cause:

Whether or not [you're] a traitor, I don't care

(Page 138)

On the other hand, Fiametta also reveals in her letter that she intended to betray S'egaye to the Eritrean cause:

In a moment, the thought came to me: for which bastard am I living, if not for myself? What is there that's better than my life? Why not betray him and live?

(Page 360)

Fiametta's indecision, or absolute refusal to make commit to an allegiance, was fundamental in her relationship with S'egaye. It first appeared when he just took her to his hotel, without asking her permission, after they had kissed on the beach:

Damn it, if you'd asked, I'd have not said yes and come. Get off! Damn it, you're a thief, I swear.

(Page 206)

S'egaye dealt with this by avoiding the decision making process altogether:

Without asking her I just took her to my hostel. It's better not to ask her. She won't say, "Yes," or "No," to anything that's asked of her. She gets distressed. She doesn't make up her mind. She doesn't decide. She says nothing though, if the decision is made for her.

(Page 280)

Nevertheless as S'egaye points out very near the beginning of the novel decision-making is man's destiny ("To decide, it is man's destiny." (Page 39)); and Fiametta is forced to make a decision about whether to betray and hand over S'egaye to be murdered by Se'lay Berahi's assassins, or sacrifice her own life. The tragedy is that she finally does decide just as S'egaye realises the emptiness of his allegiances. The only consolation is that Fiametta does feel fulfilment because her sacrificing herself for S'egaye, who is almost defined by his allegiance to the revolution and the Red Star Campaign, has given purpose to her life. Her last words before she dies, with a beautiful smile on her beautiful face are:

So, I'm a member of the Red Star Campaign, aren't I? Love has made me an organ of the Red Star Campaign. You silly...

S'egaye removes the Red Star from his chest and places it on hers, while she is lying in the magnificent coffin donated by the regime, and thereby gives the symbol of his allegiance to a corrupt folly to his true love, a martyr for his cause. With her is buried his allegiance, and the very cause itself.

Now, the significance of the final scene is growing further. In Fiametta's grave is lying the white Dove of the Red Sea and the Lantern, or peace in Eritrea and the light that showed S'egaye the truth. So I must complete the picture by exploring the gunfire at Nacfa and the screams of the blood of heroes.

The Gunfire of Nacfa and **the Screams of the Blood of Heroes**

After the more complex and interlinking imagery of the characterization of Fiametta Gilay these two images are relatively simple. The gunfire at Nacfa is an obvious allusion to the horror at the unsuccessful battle for Nacfa. S'egaye's view of war before he joins the Red Tulip Battalion is naïve. He is very impressed when he is at Solomon's house, on the occasion when he first meets Fiametta Gilay, to see Colonel Tariku chatting to the defectors whom he had previously only encountered in battle:

I wanted to be with the desert men and with Colonel Tariku, to listen to what it is that men, who used to fight each other, now spar over. Warfare is amusing, after all!

(Page 72)

The general opinion throughout the novel, from nearly all the characters, is that war is necessary for peace. One subchapter is called "The Call of the Red Star Campaign, "War and Peace" (Page 173). Central to the acceptance, or the lack of acknowledgement, of the horrors of war and the inherent contradiction of fighting a war for peace are the traditional Ethiopian values of sacrifice and heroism, as Colonel Tariku articulates as a conclusion to his briefing before the battle of Nacfa:

Most of all (?) what this war, in which we engage, demands is sacrifice. For this we have been prepared. I have no doubt that our victory banner will flutter above the noble corpses of many of us, the members of the revolutionary struggle.

(Page 294)

S'egaye is not prepared for the realities of war. He vomits when he sees a war casualty for the first time in the field. He loses all reason when he reaches the top of Hill 1702: he bayonets an already dead machine gunner: he screams at the prisoners of war, calling them 'scum of the earth': and he walks around in a daze as if he himself were dead:

As I wandered amongst the dead, I was like a man who had himself died.

(Page 324)

On reaching Afabet, after having fled Hill 1702, he does manage to articulate a more focused description of his disgust at warfare in a page long soliloquy at the beginning of Chapter Four (Page 335). His own previous ignorance of the incomparable atrocities of war is brought home to him when he meets his comrades who are waiting the hospital for war casualties in Afabet. Mes'hafe Daniel is particularly arrogant in his desire to leave Afabet as quickly as possible:

Afabet is not a place where men who govern should be. Let's go!

(Page 337)

The stark contrast between the disgust he feels at war, and the distance he sees that the ruling elite put between themselves and the reality of war, is, for S'egaye, one of the concrete experiences that allow him to believe the sincerity and veracity of Fiametta's words in her letter.

However, even to the end, S'egaye considers those who died at Nacfa, and those who died on Hill 1702 in particular, as heroes. The mission to take Hill 1702 is always portrayed as a mission of sacrifice as is reflected in Tariku's words, quoted above. Nevertheless Tariku is in no doubt about the failings of his cause: while he is talking with S'egaye in his tent before the battle, he even says that he fears bad leadership more than his enemy:

Integrity! Integrity! It's necessary to purify the revolution from the moneymen who deal in the name of the people. Because we worry more about personal renown and personal reputation, solidarity has perished and maverick racing and adventurism reigns. This kind of situation, in particular, is dangerous on the battlefield. More than the enemy, it is this that makes me very afraid.

(Page 299)

Yet S'egaye is careful to portray the soldiers as heroes, who, although they might be fighting for Revolutionary Ethiopia in this instance, are really sacrificing themselves for a higher purpose:

Any one of them was not more sympathetic to this country and this revolution than

the others, or it didn't seem so to me. But I felt one thing. They were free men inside of whom the fire of life blazed.

(Pages 315-6)

Colonel Tariku Wälday is the embodiment of the values of old Ethiopian. Even his name, Tariku, which means 'the history', is a clue to the origin of those values. Before Tariku leaves for the battlefield, S'egaye provides us with an image of Tariku as a traditional Ethiopian warrior:

His hair grew at least three inches at the front. "Why don't you cut it before you go?" they would say to him. His strength, like Samson's, as though it is in his hair, remains as long as he does not let scissors touch it. "After victory" he said to me with a tone and mood that was cold.

(Page 255)

This image works on two levels. Firstly, in comparing Tariku to Samson the traditional values of the Ethiopian church are alluded to. Secondly it was the custom of the traditional Ethiopian warrior not to cut his hair until victory was realised. The link between Tariku and traditional values was introduced very early on in the novel when S'egaye relates Tariku's noble and heroic heritage. Tariku's father was an Eritrean noble, a 'Grazmach'; and he became an Ethiopian hero (Page 19).

Neither Tariku or Fiametta were at first prepared to admit it but S'egaye does eventually

find out, from Tariku's message and Fiametta's letter, when both of their deaths had been assured, that they had had a relationship for seven years, although it was not a happy one. Peace in Eritrea was formerly in the hands of the traditional Ethiopian warrior, then it flirts with the new generation of Ethiopians until it finds S'egaye, his propaganda, and his more peaceful and persuasive approach. The traditional warrior at least would have protected Fiametta, except that they are now both dead, and S'egaye is lost, on account of all of their loyalty to a misguided venture.

Back at Fiametta's Grave

Having looked more closely at the intertwined imagery within the novel, we can understand more clearly what Bealu Girma is trying to evoke in that last scene of *Oromai*, by Fiametta's grave.

S'egaye stands with his back to Fiametta's grave. Peace in Eritrea, and the light which has shown his heart truth, have been martyred for the sake of his misplaced values. He has betrayed Roman, or traditional Ethiopia, for his dreams of peace and unity with Eritrea. He has shunned traditional Ethiopia because he has fallen in love with, and seen beauty in, alien and foreign influences. He says goodbye to his dream of peace in Eritrea in Italian ("Ciao Fiametta" (Page 371)). His mind wanders to the horrors of Nacfa, the horrors of which are a result of blindness to the consequences of his dreams and values. He hears the screams of the blood of the heroes who have died, in vain, for the corrupt goal of the Revolution, through adhering to the method which they have learnt from their traditional heritage: warfare. S'egaye loved everything: traditional Ethiopia, his allegiance to a new better Ethiopia, and peace in Eritrea: Roman, her ring and Fiametta. Now he has none of these. This novel is the story of an emotional and philosophical tragedy for S'egaye, or for Bealu Girma. *Oromai!*

Conclusion

By investigating the imagery inherent in the final scene of the Bealu Girma's *Oromai*, I hope to have revealed many of the themes and images that flow throughout this novel. Also I hope that I have shed some light on the author's motivation behind his writing it, and even the emotional and philosophical position in which he found himself at that time.

I have used imagery as the focus of my study because the imagery is so fertile and complex. Bealu Girma also directly criticizes the regime through thinly veiled, as well as exact, parallels between his characters and the actual members of the Ethiopian Derg. I have not been able to explore this, even though this would almost certainly have been the reason for his subsequent imprisonment and murder¹. Nevertheless, in my opinion the brilliance of this book is in the protagonist's, and therefore the author's, personal conflict and tragedy, even though the more blatant criticism of such a brutal regime must have taken a huge amount of courage.

I believe that I have said a lot about the themes and topics of *Oromai*, but I am astonished at how much I have had to leave out of three or four hundred quotes and references which I prepared before I began writing. I cannot have used more than a third of them. Nearly every major character in this book uses a variant on the phrase, "What's passed is passed"

¹ For a discussion of Bealu Girma's direct criticism of the regime see: **Bealu Girma: From Apologist to Critic**, Taddesse Adera, from *Silence is not golden : a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature*, edited by Taddesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed: Lawrenceville, NJ : Red Sea Press, 1995. pp 154-165

(*yaläfwäw alfo 'al -Se'lay Berahi*, (Page 88)). Hence, a study of time within the novel should be extremely fruitful. The theme of traditional values in relation to modern and outside influences is as important in this novel as it is in all modern Amharic literature, and although I have touched upon it, there is a lot more to be said. I have taken delight in the imagery used in *Oromai*, although, because I have concentrated on the tragedy, I have been unable to use the fabulously humorous imagery, which is also inherent: Rezan, S'egaye's secretary is described as looking like a rat, with only one saving grace, which is her beautiful hair (Page 34). One of my very favourite images occurs when S'egaye is incredibly busy with his work. He describes the speed with which the day passes him:

The day passed without my knowing it. It just flew past like a MIG 23 fighter jet.

(Page 237)

There is much humour in this novel.

Oromai is a fantastic novel, which contains all the ingredients of a great story: love, death, sacrifice, corruption, deceit, betrayal, humour and action. I just hope that future readers receive as much pleasure from it as I did, although we must always remember the message and gravity of some of the themes, especially because Bealu Girma gave his life for writing *Oromai*.

OROMAI

By Bealu Girma

A Study

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