

“What are you going to call our visit to this place, Samrawit? For me it is an insult. Do you wish to make me unhappy?” He was overcome with fear.

“I didn’t intend it this way. My intention was to show [you] life has two faces – warmth and coldness. It is to point out that life cannot always be fun and to show life’s facts. And to demonstrate that we are in the middle of a deluge, to show that our life is out of our control, and if we are to have a bright future we need to understand this fact. And make us fear that we don’t come here. Though our coming here is inevitable, it is good to know about that day by coming to this place before it arrives.” [Hadish Menafesha, pp. 75]

Thus speak to each other, Samuel and Samrawit, the two main characters in Hadish Menafesha the title story of a collection of short stories by Meles Negusse published in 2015. Printed by Atlas Graphic Printers, the book of 11 short stories, has 166 pages.

Many of the stories are love stories while the title story, Hadish Menafesha (The New Recreation Centre), Telebedu bKemey Tinber (How Should a Springbok Live?), Fewsi Chinqetatey (Remedy for my Anxiety), Wereqet Siminto (Cement Packaging Paper) offer variety to the collection, raising issues such as life and death, meeting life’s challenges, sacrifice and perseverance, and other life issues. The others present us with a couple, who are brought together by their needs for companionship, and are compelled to deal with the relationship challenges they have. Often in these stories, which realistically describe the love relationship that occurs between a young woman and a young man, show the difficulties that arise as the young man decides to upgrade the friendship to a romantic relationship. In these stories, the problems arise when the woman rejects the man’s advances, or she becomes reluctant because she has other plans or she is already engaged.

Among the love stories in the book, Tiqenteb (Let it be Removed), Zeytiarg Fiqri (Love that Never Grows Old), and Helen Konjo (Helen the Beautiful) are different and the most interesting. In Tiqenteb, we have an interesting character, who asks a surgeon to remove one part of his body because it causes him problems in his love relationship. The surgeon rejects his patient’s request, but that is not the most interesting part. It is the middle of the story that engages our attention, as we see how this man lose his girl-friends one after another due to this fault, which he wants removed. The story keeps us reading till the end because it gets us interested in the fate of the young man, who could not help himself. In Zeytiarg Fiqri, we have a young man who falls into a trap due to his own fault. Not contented with the girl-friend that loves him, the young man befriends another young woman, with romantic adventures in mind. The encounter turns

out badly for him as his true colours are revealed. This too is an engaging story, as the writer carefully prepares us with the descriptions of the young man's intentions and his character, and the impending disgrace that was to befall him. In Helen Konjo, we see Amanuel's tension rise as he realizes that he may lose Helen, whom he loves very much. In the middle of the story, she tells him that her family have decided to have her engaged. The reader's interest is now awakened and wants to know what will happen to Amanuel's and Helen's love. As the story comes to a conclusion, the reader is given a satisfying end.

The non-romantic stories expose us to another aspect of life. Out of these stories, I find Wereqet Siminto an interesting one. Recounted in the first person, we feel as if we are reading a Poe story. A man bent on revenge and teaching the wrongdoer a lesson.

The story spans more than twenty-five years. As the story opens in 1989, the narrator was 16 years old. At that time, he made paper bags and earned his living by selling them. It is at this time that someone cheats him off his money. And the young man decides to recover his money and teach the man a lesson.

He finds the man four times and every time he compels him to pay part of the money he 'stole'. He strives to humiliate that man in an attempt to teach him a lesson. An excellent story, and certainly not as dark as Poe's stories.

In Fewsi Chinqetatey, he comes back to an issue he has explored in one his poems, Nacfa, in another book, ZeloYu Zihlu. In Nacfa, he describes the perseverance of the fighters, during the armed struggle.

"In the shadow of death, in the shadow of wailing

Around funeral knell ringing and disturbing sound

Alone with ashes

We drank deep the boasting and dust of screaming planes

...

We rushed into the bonfire

For that is our true nature

With the smoke, we rose to the skies

For the boaster knows we won't leave you behind" (Zeloyu Zihlu, pp. 72).

In Fewsi Chinqetatey, four soldiers comfort each other and sacrifice their comforts and 'forget' family duties for the sake of national duty.

But Hadish Menafesha has also stories in which I could not understand or follow the author's intentions. A case in point is Major Wedi Bahri (Major, Child of the Sea). In the story, we have a young man named Major, who approaches the narrator and his journalist friend. He tells his story of drowning and rescue by Dutch sailors and his adoption by a Saudi man, his love-affair with his 'sister' and his deportation to Eritrea. Major also tells the narrator and his journalist friend that he had a wife, who worked in Bar Mai Aini, a short distance from the suwa-house, in which the three have a chat.

Later another woman, a young woman named Freselam claims that Major had told the narrator and the journalist a lie about himself, convincing them not to print his story in the newspaper. The woman tells them that Major often told such stories to other people. She also tells them: Major believes in such principle as this: "Life is a lie. Man, fool that he is, wanders to find the Truth that doesn't exist."

This story has two parts, Major's part, his version of his story, and Freselam's version. Which one of the two versions do we take? The two versions are irreconcilable, and we cannot by any

means get any common meaning out of the two versions. The author doesn't help us, which version we should take to form our own interpretation of the events for we are led to believe that Major's story is a fabrication, and we should throw it away. If we are then told a lie, why tell the story?

In a short story, all the different parts are added to give one complete meaning, what Poe calls, the story's single effect. Mr. Meles has achieved this effect excellently in Fewsi Chinqetatey, using the experiences of the four characters to give one single meaning. But, in Major Wedi Bahri we are left in confusion, and we cannot form any coherent interpretation of the story.

I would like to conclude by sharing my observations about the stories. Generally, one notices that Mr. Meles uses many of his stories as a platform to discuss ideas and not to tell stories. In other words, I feel that he has written his stories to raise issues, discuss them, and help them form their views about the issues raised, and not to entertain people. For these reason, in some of his stories there is no conflict between the characters. In many of his stories, the characters talk and talk, which I don't think helps the story move forward. For example, Yohannes' three friends talk indefinitely, which has nothing to do with Yohannes passing his 'test'. Couldn't Mr. Meles have deleted this discussion, full of empty talk, it turns out at the end, for Rahel didn't reject Yohannes, and none of the reasons were applicable. Or is there something I have missed?

Hadish Menafesha is an excellent collection of stories. However, Mr. Meles should notice that if he made the needs of the characters clear and described the source of conflict early on his stories will very likely engage his readers, keep them suspenseful, as they continue reading, and their ending will be more convincing.