

A tale of Ethiopia's brutal revolution

By Abebe Gellaw

Since the 1974 revolution, Ethiopia has witnessed cycles of unimaginable violence. City streets as well as remote villages that are normally far from the influence of the brutal political elites in the center have been washed with blood and littered with the bones of tormented men and women. The tragic 1974 revolution was not just a bumpy transition from a feudo-capitalist monarchy to a more progressive system as we were told time and again. It was also the beginning of untold brutality that has still continued to haunt us. It is a story of man against man, comrade against comrade, citizen against citizen.... It was simply akin to what the



English philosopher Thomas Hobbes called a state of nature, where "men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man." In the state of nature life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Upon the invitation of the Stanford Ethiopian and Eritrean Students Association, Maaza Mengiste came to Stanford University last Friday to share her own story and read a passage

from her well acclaimed first novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. She spoke with a mellifluous and passionate voice, not like a fiction writer but as someone who was amidst the turmoil witnessing all the horrors and brutalities that tormented and ruptured her homeland.

Oscar Wild once said, "Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it." The wise man was only half right as women like Maaza are writing history with incredibly powerful imagination. Though it is quite rare to find young ladies flipping through the horror stories of political violence, Maaza was among a few exceptions immersed deeply into revolutions around the world. She read books and watched films about political upheavals in Latin America, Middle East and Africa. She tried to understand human nature in the course of bloody political upheavals.

When her friends were out revelling and partying, she used to spend days and nights reading and writing about a bloodcurdling part of human history. The Ethiopian Revolution was particularly fascinating to her. But her fascination did not end there. After five years of painful emotional journey, her story came out earlier this year as a novel that vividly depicts what happened during the height of the violence.

For Maaza, the horrors and tragedies of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution started to unfold when she was a graduate student. After all, she fled Ethiopia with her family when she was around four during the height of the turmoil. She lived in Nigeria, Kenya and the United States as an exile. When she left Ethiopia, she had only faint memories of the turmoil, slogans of students, marching soldiers, sounds of gunshots, frays and grieving mothers wailing frantically around her neighbourhood.

Until she joined New York University's graduate creative writing programme in 2005, she hardly wrote anything serious about Ethiopia. But as part of her graduate school work, she made her first effort. Based on her faint childhood memories, she wrote an 11-page short story about the horrors of the violent revolution that shattered close-knit families across the country. In spite of the fact that the short story was her small debut that broke her silence and brought out her memories, it raised more questions and stirred the curiosity of her classmates. As a result, she began to delve into the grim history researching intensely, weaving the story spinning facts and imagination without any chronological order.

Like a jigsaw puzzle, she assembled the long but gripping story about the popular revolution hijacked by a brutal military junta that copied acts of atrocity from the Bolsheviks and unleashed the Red Terror campaign to silence any forms of dissent and resistance. The more she researched into Ethiopia's ugly past, the more she was sucked into the torture chambers and the killing fields.

Maaza found writing the book not only a daunting task but also an emotionally disturbing experience. Adding gloom to her personal story was the fact that she was just a poor young woman in New York City who could not afford a decent writing. Her favourite place to write was a small café in her neighbourhood. At times, tears would stream down her cheeks while writing about the unbelievable torture and brutal killings. Some customers used to offer her a cup coffee to console her but others feared to approach her thinking that she was out of her mind.

Beneath the Lion's Gaze is told from the perspective of a medical doctor's family caught up in the upheavals. Dr. Hailu, who got involved in the tragic revolutionary fervent when he helped a victim of torture, is the main character. To make matters worse, Hailu's youngest son, Dawit, was radicalized and became a member of an underground student movement that was a target of the killing squads. It was the disturbing history affecting the protagonists of the time of terror, fear, sorrow, anguish and tragedy that has become the central plot of Maaza's novel.

Maaza's daring work has received raving reviews in major publications across the US. It is a rare feat for an Ethiopian writer to enter the literary world with standing ovation. The New Yorker said: "Mengiste's social intelligence and historical research allow her to write compassionately about emotions denatured by brutal regime or calcified by conviction. But the real marvel of this tender novel is its coiled plotting, in which coincidence manages to evoke the colossal emotional toll of the revolution."

There is a powerful lesson to be learnt from history. As Maaza has powerfully resurrected memories of a tragic segment of our history, we need to reflect on the past and envision the future. Ethiopia is still a nation of uncertainties, a powder keg whose future can be as rapturous as its terrifying past. The nation has gone through the excruciating pains of a violent revolution and a protracted civil war that brought about more calamities, famine, divisions and genocidal killings. The stable and prosperous country that the young revolutionary idealists had hoped to build is still a far cry. Their immeasurable sacrifices have been fruitless and their clarion calls for land to the tiller, equality, justice and freedom have never been answered.

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it,” as the philosopher George Santayana said. The doom and gloom of Ethiopia perpetuated by tyrants, past and present, must end somewhere if we are really willing to learn from our terrible history of violence and brutality. It is an unacceptable truth for a nation to suffer for nearly a century under three diminutive despots, the king, the army officer and the narrow-minded ethnocrat.

Today Ethiopia is standing at the crossroads of history. It is heavily pregnant with a burning desire for change that can trigger a sudden eruption at any time. Whether we like it or not, the call for change will be answered and the volcano of anger and frustration suppressed by tyranny will eventually explode. In the face of a tyrannical resistance to change, the peaceful way seems to have lesser chance of success than the curse of violence and vengeance that has already destroyed our rich history and heritage. As John F. Kennedy said: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible, make violent revolution inevitable.”

Revolution is a process; first it is conceived in the hearts of true believers, then it contagiously spread to the masses and in the final phase it explodes like a volcano. No guns and tanks have managed to stop real revolutions throughout the world.

Beneath the Lion's Gaze, which is a tale of brutality and cruelty in “revolutionary” Ethiopia, is a must read for those who want to understand tortured nations like Ethiopia in a better and deeper way. History has a lot to teach....