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Modernism in Eritrea: Beyene Haile's "Abidu'do Tibliwo" as the Primal Aesthetic and Experimental Novel

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Abstract

Published in 1964, Abidu'do Tibliwo is one of Eritrea's most highly regarded novels. It pioneered a new style of writing that rebelled against the literary conventions of the 1960s and earlier. Written in Tigrinya, the novel shares many Modernist features that transcended 1960s literary sensibilities, influencing numerous post-independence writers in Eritrea. It has courted controversy and been subjected to extreme scrutiny due to its challenge of contemporary literary norms. Unlike the early postcolonial literary canon of Africa, which favoured social realism, its avant-garde inception was unparalleled. This raises questions about how and why this literary text deviated from the norm, accentuating Modernism in defiance of the continent's evolving socio-political concerns and literary conventions. This article explains how the novel challenged literary and cultural traditions by emphasizing alienation, non-conformity, aesthetics and experimentation. Stylistic and thematic analysis is employed to demonstrate its modernist qualities as a revolutionary text within the nation and on the continent as a whole.

Keywords: Modernity, Modernism, Non-conformity, Alienation, Aestheticism, Experimentation, Abidu'do Tibliwo, Eritrea

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Modernism between Europe and Africa: A Contextual Introduction

The dawn of the 20th century was a turning point in the literary, artistic, socio-cultural, and political history of the world. With the emergence of modernity in the new era, a new philosophic and literary movement called Modernism arose in Europe in the early 1900s. Rather than a single movement, Modernism is broadly understood in Poplawski's sense (2017: 497) as a blend of various literary and artistic movements, encompassing movements such as symbolism, futurism, expressionism, naturalism, imagism, and surrealism, that was at its peak in the early 1920s. It is also prevalently believed that these challenges emerged with the self-conscious intention of revolting against traditional literary conventions of the past (Eksteins 2000: xiv-xvi).

In European literary history, this movement is typically associated with the consequences of industrialization and the world wars. In the era that preceded Modernism, European and North American societies produced several remarkable inventions and treatises on evolutionary theory, which cumulatively transformed humanity in intellectual, cultural, and economical terms. However, while the privileged classes experienced a renewed sense of vitality, the majority of the population remained marginalized by the harsh realities of the new machine age. In order to survive in the emerging capitalistic market, many people worked for the privileged class in poor living conditions. These conditions, coupled with long working hours and low pay, degraded the population inhumanely. Consequently, many modernist writers of the period decided to construct their characters as disillusioned and alienated individuals. Technically, this alienation can be understood as a resentment of modernity. Paul-Francois Tremlett in his essay *Modernism and Postmodernism*, vividly captured this ambivalent nature of Modernism saying that ''Modernism anticipated a brighter tomorrow but at heart was a series of seemingly insoluble tensions'' (2021: 325). Despite the optimistic outlook on the exalted discoveries and innovations, Modernism was hence juxtaposed with psychological tensions due to the socio-economic and cultural uncertainties of the era. Thus, social change and war, coupled with the deviant philosophies of 19th and 20th century European thinkers, have necessitated authors to emerge with different and unconventional methods of expression and writing styles, in order to reflect the unprecedented psychic apathy of the modern individual.

The revolutionary movement, however, was not confined to Europe. Although at the beginning Modernism was considered as an exclusively Western artistic and literary movement, the socio-cultural scenarios of the 20th-century had far-reaching effects across the globe. The emerging modernity, technological

advancement, philosophies, (post-)colonial frustrations, and socio-political upheavals have influenced the perspectives and psychological mentality of societies in the Global South as well as in the 'Oriental' East. Hence, transcending Europe's geographical borders and extending some temporal parameters, the movement has spread to many countries, influencing scores of writers worldwide.

In Africa, modern African literature unveiled its curtains to international academics late, over two decades after its inception, in the 1960s. Special attention was given to male authors such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child*, and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (see Ojaide 1992: 43). Especially Achebe's[1] first novel emerged remarkably as iconic image that represents African modern literature. However, these canonized African writers did not emphasize Modernism in their style as many of the modernist features of purpose, content, and structure were not incorporated into their literature.[2] These writers shared convictions about the social value of their literary works. In other words, they believed that literature should primarily serve the interests of the community and the wider society. Building on this idea, Ojaide argues that ''African literature was primarily a cultural instruction [...] no art for the art's sake in Africa'' (1992: 44). These African literatures mostly criticized and instructed society about moral and social conduct that should be embraced by the community. Unlike modernist literature, these African literary works are suffused with an interplay of supernatural elements, mysticism, and traditional narrative styles accompanied by proverbs and folktales (Obiechina 1992: 200-288; Ojaide 1992: 46-53). Conversely, the modernist aesthetic values of literature oppose instruction as the primary purpose of literary works. Some of the deviant features of modernists are subjectivity of individualism, fragmentation, non-conformity to traditional (realist) technique, and the self-reflexive consciousness and alienation (disillusionment) of the character.

[1] Although Chinua Achebe had limited affiliation with Modernism, as reflected in the title of his first novel, he considered the technique incompatible with representing African reality, opting for realism instead to address the postcolonial crises (see Gikandi 2019: 6).

[2] It is worth mentioning other African novels from the 1960s and 1970s, such as Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy (1977); Euphrase Kezilahabi's Roza Mistika (1971); and Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968), which feature experimental and modernist elements. However, it was Abidu'do Tibliwo that pioneered these later publications.

Modernity and the Emergence of Modern Literature in Eritrea

Although Eritrea had an indigenous tradition of urbanism dating back to the 8th-century B.C (Dirar 2004: 536), the modern concept of modernity only emerged with the arrival of the Italian colonizers (1890-1941). Initially, the Italians planned to implement a settlement scheme, but this was met with aggressive opposition by the indigenous population (Negash 1986: 43). Later, the Italians shifted their plans to making Eritrea "a source of raw materials and a market for Italian manufactures as well as trading centres" (Dirar 2007: 58). In order to fulfil these ambitious goals, the Italians launched the construction of massive infrastructure projects across the country. However, despite the country's rapid modernization in terms of infrastructure, local literary production remained scarce until the late 1940s. The major reason for the delay in literary publication was the restrictive educational policy that excluded the colonized from educational opportunities, as the "educational policy in Italian colonies was suffused with racism" (Pretelli 2011: 276). In his comprehensive book, *The History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea*, Professor Ghirmai Negash specifically points out that the low level of the education system during the Italian colonial period, coupled with the repressive 'politico-ideological control' of the colony after 1922, were major setbacks for the production and publication of novels in between 1917 and 1942 (1999: 110). High levels of illiteracy, combined with restricted freedom of expression, critically hampered the development of indigenous literature. This began to change with the arrival of the relatively more liberal British colonial administration (1941-1952), which provided the population with greater access to education and freedom of expression.

The first newspaper to be published in the local language Tigrinya was founded in 1942 and was known as *Nay Eretra Semunawi Gazet'a* ('Eritrean Weekly News'). The creation of this inaugural paper played a crucial role in encouraging literary production by native authors (Habtu 1981: 38). The chief-editor of the newspaper, Welde-abb Welde-maryam, is one of the most prominent figures of this era. He contributed numerous articles that indirectly fostered a tradition of readership and ultimately paved the way for subsequent literary publications. Prominent writers who participated in these thriving publications included *Berhe Araya*, Ghebreyesus Hailu, Asres Tessema, Musa Aron, Misgina Tekeste, Araya Belay and Abeba Tesfagiorgis Ba'tay, among others (see Negash, 1999: 146-150). These authors wrote in Tigrinya for the small number of Eritreans who had the opportunity to become literate either in the newly emerging schools or in traditional literacy centres (churches). Themes were primarily centred on family life, taboos, morality, and mortality, often anchored in the socio-cultural and

political dynamics of the period, which were directly influenced by colonial experiences and the advent of modernity.

Unlike the gradual literary evolution in the country, the artistic sensibilities of Modernism were first introduced through the architectural designs of buildings constructed by the Italian colonizers from the early 1900s to the 1940s. During their colonial rule, the Italians constructed infrastructure, including highways, railways, bridges, factories, and large modern farming plantations. Among these, the longest electric wire transportation system in Africa was also part of the Italian construction in Eritrea. However, in terms of aestheticism, none of these are comparable to the residential and commercial buildings, hotels, cinemas, gas stations, churches, and mosques built in the modernist Art Deco style. These buildings are historically significant in that they capture the essence of modernist artistic designs in architectural form.

Despite the celebration of Modernism in architectural design, local popular culture could not rise until the 1960s. Preliminary reforms to educational and political policies by the British military administration paved the way for the development of artistic practices, which eventually led to the formation of two artistic associations: *Mahber Tewas'o Deqqebat* ('The Natives' Theatrical Association') in 1944 and *Mahber Tinsa'e Hagerawi Bahli* ('The Revival of National Culture Association') in 1957. However, it was not until 1961, with the establishment of the Asmara Theatre Association *Mahber Theatre Asmara* that traditional Eritrean arts began to flourish and merge with modern styles in performing arts and music. These artistic associations, along with substantial Western influence, were instrumental in the rise of modern popular culture during the 1960s. Furthermore, the Radio *Kagnew*, which broadcast Western music from the American military base in Asmara from 1943 to 1977, played a significant part in modernizing Eritrean music. Consequently, conventional music styles initially performed using instruments such as the *Chira-Wata, Kirar, Kebero, Embilta,* and *Shambiqo* were integrated and blended with new instruments, resulting in a distinctive genre referred to by the local populace as *Zemenawi muziqa* ('Modern Music').

In terms of literature, although many literary texts have been produced since the 1950s — and few since 1927 — none of these have adopted an experimental or modernist approach and the conception of an avant-garde novel was unimaginable. Thematically, novels of the 1950s and 1960s predominantly focused on two major issues: politico-historical and socio-cultural aspects of society. Novels such as *Hade Zanta* (written in 1927 but published in 1950) by Ghebreyesus Hailu and translated into English as *The Conscript: A Novel of Libya's*

Anti-Colonial War[3] by Ghirmai Negash; *Wegahta Natsenet* (1954) meaning 'Down of Freedom' by Tekklay Zeweldi; and *Aynefelale* (1967) meaning 'Let's not be Divided' by Misgina Tekeste, *Mek'an Mealti* (1971/72) meaning '*Sterile Day*' by Michael Mehari, *Haylom Wedi Asmara* (1967) meaning '*Haylom the Son of Asmara*' by Yeshaq Yosief, and *Qebireyo Beluni* (1957) meaning '*Tell me You Have Buried Him*' by Debesu Abebe, all written in Tigrinya, have strongly emphasized themes of colonial oppression and resistance. As the country grew to become a military and commercial hub in the Horn of Africa, male citizens began to abandon their traditional life styles of animal husbandry and farming to work in the cities as conscripts and factory workers. Likewise, many women migrated to cities to be recruited as maids for the European colonial masters and the privileged classes. The most significant paradigm shift, however, took place when Italians announced a ''new type of transregional circulation that brought an influx of working people into the Eritrean colony'' (Bellucci/Zaccaria 2014: 90). This attracted many foreigners, including Italians, Africans, and Arabs, who sought employment and worked as government officials, soldiers, and in other menial roles in the private sector. This migration spanned from the late 1880's until the emergence of British administration (Ibid. 91). As these immigrants were mainly single men or men travelling without their wives, they played a significant role in the spread of prostitution on an unimaginable scale (Pankhurst 1962:167). The congregation of Italians with other foreigners – mainly Somalis, Ethiopians, and Yemenis – fostered dysfunctional families with many young and middle-aged Tigrinya women plunging into prostitution and jobs related to brewing and serving beverages. These were culturally considered lowly and taboo for Eritreans. Consequently, many mid-20th century Tigrinya novels, such as *Aywereskun* (1953) meaning 'I Did Not Inherit' by Alemseged Tesfu; *Ayneberkun* (1960) meaning 'I Did Not Exist' by Araya Belay; *Abadit Gualey* (1967) meaning 'Abadit, my daughter' by Ghirmai Tesema, *Meshet Mishet Mera* (1967/68) meaning 'Daily Wedding' by Abreha Gebrehiwet, *Tsibuq Wisane* (1969) meaning 'A Fair Verdict' by Neguse Haile Menseay, *Miqur Merzi* (1961) meaning 'Sweet Poison' by *Berhe Araya*, and *Werqiha* (1966) by Mussa Aron – to mention a few – were completely absorbed with criticizing this aberrated social practice.

Stylistically, the novels of this period adhered to a linear narrative structure, progressing from beginning to end. Often, the narration was inspired by the writers' first-hand life experience, alongside with a commentary on the socio-cultural context. The novels' primary aim was therefore social. Artistically, the

[3] Hailu, Gebreyesus (2013). The Conscript: A Novel of Libya's Anticolonial War. Trans. Ghirmay Negash. Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP.

novels lacked literary aspects such as symbolic representation and complex narrative techniques. Possibly due to the elevated intimacy with traditional Tigrinya folktales, third-person narratives dominated, and they were often non-focalized. Frequently, the boundaries between author and narrator were blurred. This resulted in the author substituting his voice for that of the narrator, causing the "novelist's authorial intervention in the narration" as in the case of *Werkiha* by Mussa Aron (Negash 1999: 155).

Amidst these conservative literary practices in 1964, a young author named Beyene Haile emerged with a new novel entitled *Abidu'do Tibliwo*? meaning 'Would You Say He Has Gone Mad?'. Haile was born in 1941 in Asmara. Although he had written the novel at the young age of 18 years, it was not published until he was 23 in 1964. The year after he finished writing the novel, in 1958, Haile won a scholarship to study Political Science and Public Administration at the American University in Beirut. After finishing his studies, Haile worked as a researcher, director, and training consultant for various organizations in both Asmara and Addis Ababa. Nearly four decades later, he published two more novels – *Deqwan Tebereh* meaning 'Tebereh's Shop' (2003) and *Titsbit Bahgu* meaning 'Bahgu's Expectation' (2006) – and a play titled *Wegi Libi*, meaning 'Heart to Heart,' which was performed in Asmara in 2009. Interestingly, like the protagonist Mezghebe in the first novel, Haile was a painter who remained single until his death on 29 June 2012. Moreover, Negash notes that Haile spent part of his formative years in Adi-Grat, where the novel is partly set. Like Mezghebe, Haile later moved to Asmara, where he wrote the manuscript before earning his B.A degree (Negash 1999: 164). These elements, combined with Haile's enlightened embrace of aesthetic experimentation, mirroring Mezghebe's preference for abstract modernist painting, lend the novel a distinctly autobiographical quality.

Despite his young age, in this seminal novel Haile pioneered a new writing style that radically accentuated the self-consciousness of the individual. When compared to earlier and contemporaneous novels, his literary piece was distinguished in terms of its content, structure, literary devices, and purpose. Not only is this novel presented as the archetypal modernist text, composed self-consciously to challenge literary traditions, it also strives to thematically conjure the life experience of an individual in the culturally turbulent calamity of modernity. Like many modernist authors who were troubled by the clash between old and new traditions, Haile despaired over the nihilism and fanaticism of the transitional era of modernity. He, too, experienced a similarly conflicted perception of cultural confusion. Consequently, while this novel was

contended to revolutionize literary conventions within the country and the continent, it was also encapsulated in an ambivalent tension towards the issue of tradition versus modernity.

Originally, this novel was written in Tigrinya, one of Eritrea's working languages.[4] Novels composed in indigenous languages, including all the aforementioned novels, possess an indisputable intrinsic depth, enriched by the inherent originality of their socio-cultural spirit. Despite the underrepresentation of African languages in international literature, the translation of a number of texts into English has facilitated their dissemination to a global audience of readers and scholars, thereby promoting enhanced international exposure and understanding. Five decades after its publication, Haile's novel has also been translated into English by Hiruy Ghirmai under the title *Mezghebe: Would You Say He Was Mad*.[5] This translation has similarly enhanced the novel's accessibility to a broader audience. However, given the apprehensive sentiment toward the translation, this article opted for the original Tigrinya novel for analysis, in an effort to remain faithful to the spirit in which it was originally composed.

Experimentation with Narrative Technique and Plot

The novel opens with a second-person narration. A police detective (Captain Berhe) engages in conversation with the main protagonist, Mezghebe. In a lengthy monologue, the detective recounts pivotal events from Mezghebe's childhood, particularly the early days of his school life and the profound and affectionate bond he shared with his sister, Kidisti. After this detailed account of his childhood, the detective encourages Mezghebe to continue his own story. Drawing upon his recollections and guided by the detective's account, Mezghebe resumes the narrative from the days that are particularly vivid in his memory. Consequently, the narrative perspective transitions to the first person. Mezhgebe uses a flashback narrative technique to recount his early infancy, shedding light on his enrolment at school and the love-hate dynamics of his relationships with his fellow students. Subsequently, his sister takes over the narration, providing a third-person account of her brother's physical appearance and distinctive temperament. She plainly describes Mezghebe's early life and his romantic

[4] Eritrea is located in a geographical convergence zone between the Middle East, the Indian Ocean and Northeast Africa. Despite its small size (124,000 sq. km), the country is rich in linguistic diversity, with nine languages belonging to the Semitic, Cushitic, and Nilotic language families. Of these, Tigrinya and Arabic are the country's official working languages.

[5] Haile, Beyene (2013). Mezghebe: Would You Say He Was Mad? Trans. Huriy Ghirmai. London: Azab Publishers.

relationship with Zaid, his childhood lover. The continuous disagreement and hostility between her brother and his friends and neighbours, are vividly presented when she explains his daily life to a group of friends during her sea voyage from Italy to Eritrea, returning from her studies in the US.

Most emphatically, she focuses on the intrinsic life of Mezghebe as an artist who devotes all his time to a form of art that provokes resentment from his family, friends, and society at large. This ultimately results in his profound disconnection from his lover, his village, and his conventional life. Towards the end of her narration, Kidisti's fiancé Tekali emerges as the author-narrator, who has been subliminally and anonymously compiling all the fragmented stories. Tekali discloses his identity as a character and, shortly afterwards, he continues the narration through the voice of Mezghebe's aunt Tiibe. Tiibe is an educated woman who recounts the events from the day she welcomed Mezghebe (her nephew) in her home until his demise, which occurred shortly after his confessional interview with Captain Berhe. During her narration, her maid Biri also shares her memories of Mezghebe. Tiibe shares a letter with Tekali from Tesfay, Mezghebe's uncle who married Zaid. The letter expresses Tesfay's remorse for his unintentional intervention in Mezghebe's life. In it, Tesfay also talks about his wife Zaid's anguish and repentance, who blamed herself for the loss of her first lover, Mezghebe. Tekali finally concludes the narration by announcing his marriage to Kidisti, who is pregnant and promises to name her child 'Mezghebe' in honour of her late brother.

As exploring the inner consciousness of characters is one of the fundamental purposes of Modernism, modernists strive to depict their narration in a manner that is more or less unrestrained, much like the human mind itself. In real life, the human mind processes thoughts consistently yet in a fragmented manner. This fundamentally compels modernist storytellers to craft narratives that often lack a traditional plot. When a plot does exist, it unfolds with deliberate complexity and non-linear progression, reflecting the intricate, interwoven nature of human thought and everyday experience. Like many modernists of his time, Beyene Haile employs a sophisticated narrative structure in his novel, characterized by frequent shifts in perspective and character narrators as the plot evolves. The narrative unfolds in a way that is different from conventional storytelling: the detective recounts a significant childhood experience of the protagonist to the protagonist himself, in order to investigate a crime that he has committed but which has not yet been revealed. In the subsequent chapter, the narrative retrospectively revisits the protagonist's infancy. When Kidisti (Mezghebe's sister) resumes the narration, she takes the story back even further

in time. She passes the narration on to her aunt, who then passes it on to Tekali, a friend of hers who intervenes and discloses his authorship of Mezghebe's biography.

Despite the story's unsteady back and forth movement through time, a critical reader can realize that the story begins in the middle part of the novel, when a group of higher education students (Kidisti, Tekali, Fisha, and Kiflom) traveling from the USA to Eritrea, decide to visit Europe. During a visit to an art museum in Rome, Kidisti collapses at the foot of a sculpture of a woman that evokes her memory of her late brother Mezghebe. After a while she regains consciousness with the help of nearby onlookers and her friends. She then tells the group the story of her brother, explaining the reason for her sudden collapse at the art museum (p. 83). Tekali is one of the spectators of the event. Deeply interested in the story, he is inspired to delve into Mezghebe's story. Hence, implicitly, he takes on the role of the central figure, Mezghebe, striving to drive the story home anonymously. He delves into the story by asking all relatives who knew Mezghebe well, and through their voices, yet his own consciousness, he narrates Mezghebe's story. However, his overt narrative voice only appears in Chapter Three (p. 81). Readers can only deduce that the story (including the narrations of the first two chapters, which were narrated by the detective, Mezghebe, and Kidisti) was presented through Tekali's consciousness by actively and critically associating the fragmented events. Amid the continuous transition of narrators, the reader is compelled to piece together a comprehensive narrative from the scattered fragments of narration. A comparative analysis of Haile's novel thus reveals an unmistakable departure from the conventional linear narrative technique that dominated the genre. Every fragmented form of imagination, memory, feeling, abstraction, and verbal and artistic expression, as a result of the protagonist's overall inner consciousness, insights this modernists' experimental narratology.

The Author as a Non-conformist and Proponent of Art

One of the qualities that distinguished Beyene Haile from his contemporary African writers was his firm belief in art for art's sake, which boldly opposed the realists' claim of social purpose. Unlike Achebe, Thiong'o, and Soyinka, who sought to use their literature as an instrument for "social cohesion" (Ojaide 1992: 45), Haile challenged all conventional norms of social conduct that imposed strong communal intervention. He is an acclaimed proponent of aestheticism, a movement that was introduced by the Europeans (specifically, the French) in the

late nineteenth century. Despite his scepticism about considering art as solely an emotional outflow of feelings (a Romantic conviction), Haile argues that to a certain degree, art is also a reflection of the period in which it is created (*Preface* p. 3). However, as an obstinate proponent of aestheticism, he clearly expresses his conviction in the preface to his debut novel as follows:

> "As far as fiction writers exclusively aim to educate and discipline people, there is a high probability that they will dissociate themselves from pure aesthetic writing. That is, not to distinguish between educators and fiction writers, but since fiction is a self-contained art form, its artistic quality should be prioritized. If it is important for a lesson, then it must be coincidental. And when we speak of its importance, I believe it is the aesthetic importance, rather than an economic one. I don't think it's right to expect a tangible social fruit from a writer." (pp. 3-4)[6]

In a 1996 interview with Prof. Negash about his views on literature and his novel, Haile said: "What I wanted to do with that book was to create an artist character. Mezghebe [the main protagonist] is a giant dreamer, an artist, and in that sense, larger than life. As a writer, I, too, am a dreamer—with all the limitations of a dreamer." (1999: 159-160). As a fervently inspired aesthetic writer, Haile obstinately rejects any specific utility or moral intention. Instead, as a proponent of *art for art's sake*, he presents a novel that celebrates art as a superior entity with intrinsic aesthetic value. Haile depicts Mezghebe as a character who is utterly obsessed with art and beauty and who indulges himself completely in the reflection and contemplation of nature's beauty. Emphatic descriptions of the beauty of open fields in the village, the garden at Tiibe's residence house, as well as overemphasized explanations of the paintings, sculptures, and appearances of women in the streets of Asmara highlight the author's sincere aesthetic inclination. However, the perception of beauty itself is questioned and presented in a novel way. The protagonist argues persistently that old blind women, old men covered with beards, beggars and needy people are equally beautiful and worthy of inclusion in artistic pieces (pp. 53, 92). Kidisti's account of Mezghebe's looks as an overtly handsome young boy does not represent an ordinary description of beauty. His attractiveness does not stem from his physical appearance, but rather from an inner spirit that is abstractly projected onto anyone who looks into his eyes (p. 18).

[6] All translations in this article are by the author of this article.

In the preface, the novelist directs further criticism at the nation's and continent's writers for their utilitarian views on literature. He criticizes those who strive to educate readers, adamantly arguing that the primary purpose of literature should be aesthetic. This criticism appears to be directed specifically at contemporary African writers who adhere to societal expectations. In his analysis of Haile's preface to the novel, Dhar states that it ''deprecates the position taken decades ago by African writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o that their novels are meant to expose falsities that have been instilled in their people by colonial masters about their history and culture and to restore their damaged selves.'' (2014: 2).

Thematically, the novel explores beauty, importance and universality of art, as well as the sacrifices involved in its appreciation. Like many modernists who prioritize art as "the highest form of human achievement'' (Childs 2002: 19), the novel illustrates art's reverential superiority. The protagonist abandons his family, lover, and social life, ultimately sacrificing his life for his passion for art. However, although the artist (Mezghebe) dies at the end of the novel, his death is presented as anything but oblivious, as evidenced by the display of his exhilarating artistic pieces surrounding his tomb for exhibition (p. 111). Mezghebe's grave, which he has stipulated should be laid alongside his artistic creations, serves as a testament to his unwavering commitment to art, which he prioritizes above all else. This afterlife arrangement recognizes art's lasting legacy and transcendent permanence, suggesting that it continues even after the creator's death. The novelist employs implicit implications to drive the story home, the central idea that art can only flourish through absolute dedication, with artists making huge sacrifices, including facing social exclusion and even risking their own lives. Tesfai, the deceased artist's educated uncle, writes in a letter to his sister:

> "*Mezghebe-Tibeb* sacrificed his life for Art, for the sake of human enlightenment. At a young age, he nearly took his own life. Perhaps some people might say that *Mezghebe* was not happy for even a single day. However, the times he was dejected were rare. Since self-sacrifice for beauty, great art, and knowledge is joyful, *Mezghebe* is also gleeful." (p. 109).

Moreover, the novel portrays art as a universal entity that bestows a cosmopolitan identity upon artists. Hence, artists and their creations are regarded as treasures of all humankind without discrimination. Through

Tesfay's voice, Haile has articulated his commitment to the 'universalism of art' as follows:

> "Dear *Meiraf*, we should not grieve because of *Mezghebe*'s separation from us. *Mezghebe* was not created for us. He was not born for our small family, our small village, or for Africa only. He was for the whole world. His works do not exhibit bias or favouritism between races and ethnicities, wealth and poverty, countries and nations. People like *Mezghebe*, and countries and cities filled with such kinds of people's fruits are not ... for distinguished people only. Paris is not only for the French people, *Beethoven* is not only appreciated by the Germans, the wonders of *Michaelangelo* and *Leonardo da Vinci* were not only for Italian taste. If English people say *Shakespeare* belongs to us only, then they are wrong. And *Mezghebe* is not just yours (son). His family circle is not small, unlike that of most ordinary people. It is very vast because the world itself is *Mezghebe*'s home. He is a cousin to the Japanese, a nephew to the Russians, and a brother to the Americans. In short, *Mezghebe* is a precious possession of the world." (p. 108)

Additionally, one significant feature that characterizes Haile as a modernist is his use of anti-conventional techniques, setting the novel apart from its contemporaries with their strong commitment to social, political, and moral issues. For instance, it offers different perceptions of marriage, disability, and gender to those hold by society. Although the novel does not overtly address social issues, it portrays marriage as a union based on love rather than the traditional practice of arranged marriages prevalent in the 1960s. Disability in the novel is not a barrier to leading a fulfilling live or forming successful relationships (p. 110). Contrary to the deprecating depictions of women in contemporary novels by male authors, women in this novel are portrayed as independent and capable in various spheres of life, including education and finance (p. 97). The novelist's bold challenge to established social norms highlights the novel's philosophical non-conformity as a modernist work. In traditional African societies, including Eritrea, the burial of a corpse is a highly venerated undertaking conducted on sacred ground. However, the deceased protagonist's body is buried in a self-made cement coffin in the middle of a garden, surrounded by his artistic creations. This site functions as both an inspirational and recreational space rather than a conventional burial place (p. 111).

Unlike many utilitarian literary works of the 1960s, this novel has an open ending without any specific moral message. Towards the end of the narration,

the author-narrator Tekali asks Mezghebe's father Mr. Amanuel how he feels about his son's life and death. In response, Mr. Amanuel offers a parable:

"It is like a boat that plunges into a deep, streaming current with one person on it. If the river willingly or unwillingly rescued it from its' splashing and raging wave, it lands (reaches) somewhere, good or bad" (p. 111).

To deepen the parable's philosophical intonation, the author seems to deliberately leave it unpunctuated, making the riddle even more puzzling. Is it a question that the narrator has left in suspense? Is it a statement lacking the necessary full stop? The renowned Irish modernist James Joyce is known for experimenting with language and punctuation in his novels. In his famous novel *Ulysses*, the last fifty pages are written without any punctuation, except a full stop at the end. Similarly, Haile appears to intentionally omit certain punctuation marks in this novel. Some conversations are punctuated while others are not. Given the importance of the final articulation as a concluding statement, it is hard to ignore the possibility that this omission is deliberate. It seems to be a deliberate ploy by the novelist to complicate the puzzle; further linguistic research is required to explore this aspect in more depth.

Many of the novel's characters perceive Mezghebe as a man who has gone mad at a young age. Tesfay, who states that the people in their village accept Mezghebe's madness without question, speculates that this may "because they have seen what *Mezghebe* has painted near the final days of his short life." (p. 109). Tesfay's letter indicates that most people found the artist's abstract paintings incomprehensible, which made him an outsider. Mezghebe's abstract art deliberately breaks artistic conventions and amply insinuates a shift in thought paradigms in the society, which has elicited confrontation. After creating his first sculpture of a man with extraordinary features, Mezghebe finds himself in fundamental disagreement with his best friend Ghebre (p. 53). The confrontation escalates to the point where he becomes involved in a quarrel with his family. As his mother becomes increasingly concerned, she openly expresses her feelings, saying, ''I am not really pleased about his recent artistic works. It is so complex that I could neither understand its meaning nor its intentions. It is indeed hidden and convoluted'' (p. 55).

The breaking of the conventions in realist art has horrified many. Mezghebe's complete preoccupation with his art, coupled with his extraordinary artistic work (which is synonymous with his conscious violation of the societal thought norms), has exacerbated the situation. This tension manifests as various reactions from those around him: his lover evades him; his parents are

concerned; his best friend Ghebre quarrels with him; the priest Tirfu is hostile; and his son's mother is envious. Tesfay, in a letter to Miraf (Mezghebe's mother), gravely warns her to keep a close watch on Mezghebe's son and prevent any involvement in art. He illustrates that it was art that robbed them of their beloved son, brother, father, and lover, Mezghebe (p. 110).

The novel's title itself is another non-conformist, conceited, rhetorical and psychological device that encourages active reading. The title does not explicitly declare whether the protagonist is mad or not, leaving this question open for the reader to decide. Rather than passively accepting the writer's instructions, it invites readers to actively participate in the thought process and to form their own judgment about the protagonist's "madness". This was a radical departure from the conventional literary norms of the era which presented judgemental and revealing titles that summarized the novels' basic moral message.

Alienation: Haile's Engagement with Nihilism

Artistically, the novelist incorporates multiple symbols that challenge societal conventionality. One way in which he achieves this is by questioning habitual life patterns. The protagonist's lamp is one of the novel's most significant symbols. On a bright day, Mezghebe is seen walking among a group of people with his lamp lit brightly. This can be interpreted as a symbol for society's lack of enlightenment, dooming them to slumber in ignorance. Therefore, the novelist implicitly criticizes society for stumbling mindlessly in the darkness of outdated traditions. The author also applies symbolic images of objects and activities not only to present his non-conformist convictions, but also to vividly capture the protagonist's sense of alienation. For instance, a nightstand which was a gift from his Aunt Tiibe to decorate Mezghebe's room is portrayed upside down in his isolated house (p. 96). Unlike his peers, Mezghebe wears a disproportionate hat and coat, which is described as neither long nor short like any ordinary jacket (pp. 88, 89). This symbolizes the protagonist's inner state of continuous unrest and an invitation for society to discard conservative and non-progressive lifestyles or any convention at all. Moreover, it is also a form of protest against conventional artistic works the artists of which were, unlike the novelist, uncreative in their techniques. By making Mezghebe's attire different from other characters' ordinary clothing, the novelist suggests that all artists need to come up with new ideas and literary creativity to distinguish themselves from each other through their unique styles. Through the protagonist's alienation, the author depicts the inevitable retribution for artistic non-conformity, yet

implicitly emphasizes that it is an honourable sacrifice expected from artists endowed with creativity.

As the story develops in the novel, the protagonist gradually but intensely immerses himself in a state of mind where he questions his existential values. At times, meaninglessness prevails and eludes his taste of life. Art was the sole asylum of his existence. The more he matured, the more he engaged with art, and consequently, the more alienated he became. Initially, Mezghebe anticipated the desolation that might come from losing his lover, fearing that such a loss would devastate him. He equates his life to a chain of rings connecting him and society through circular life trends. One of these circles that held his life's ingredients together was Zaid (his lover). He prematurely assumes that losing her might devastate his life and thrust him into a desperate existence. As a child, Mezghebe rarely joined the group of boys at school. His sister says, that it was difficult to see him at home at lunchtime or during family gatherings. There are many more incidents that portray Mezghebe as being alienated from his environment. When he was among other boys in class or outside, he often seemed to be in a state of momentary abstraction. For instance, Kidisti once observed him walking among the other boys and noted that her brother did not seem to be mentally present, saying: "When he walks with them, he doesn't look like one of them. Rather, it seems as if they were taking him for a sale or he was among them merely to observe them." (p. 19).

As he grows up, his alienation intensifies both physically and psychologically. On the day he arrives in Asmara, his aunt says that he took a long time to get off the bus, and that she even thought he had might not have come at all. When she later asks him about this, he replies that he stayed on the bus to avoid the crowd (p. 87). She further narrates that he can hardly concentrate on her conversation for more than half an hour at home and usually closes himself in his room (p. 88). Like in his village, Mezghebe remains a lonely student in high school in Asmara. According to his aunt's narration, none of his schoolmates knows him, and she adds that many of them do not even know his name (p. 89). Once, his aunt attempted to relieve him from his alienation by taking him to a club. She compares his state to that of his peers: "While I and *Mezghebe* were drinking beer in the bar, I saw some young boys around *Mezghebe*'s age rising and dancing on the floor. However, *Mezghebe* was contemplating melancholically, hanging his head down" (p. 91).

Mezghebe's sense of alienation escalates to a point where he wants to isolate himself completely from his environment. The house he rents after leaving his aunt's is located on the far eastern edge of the city, with no other houses visible

nearby or beyond (p. 95). However, he seems elated about his isolation. During a conversation with his mother about his lonely, isolated house, he tells her: "Mother, this house that you call a ruin is very comfortable for me. Above all, it offers absolute solitude" (p. 96). He is presented there as completely absorbed in his artistic activity and neglecting his physical well-being, which often exposes him to severe illness. This extraordinary aesthetic alignment is, in a way, an escape from the ordinary life reality, that portrays a desolate spirit of the alienated character.

The Ambivalence of the Modernists: Tradition vs Modernity

When discussing Modernism as a subject, it is imperative to acknowledge the dichotomy between the cultural elements of tradition and modernity. The modernist philosophical movement is characterized by its complexity and frequently lacks a definitive boundary, which is attributable to the chaotic atmosphere it engenders. Peter Childs emphasizes that ''[m]odernity is both the culmination of the past and the harbinger of the future'', thereby complicating ''socio-cultural relations and aesthetic representations'' (2002: 16). The most widely recognized characteristic remains its revolutionary opposition to historical literary traditions. Christopher Butler corroborates this stance, asserting that the work of modernists tends to ''distance itself from the past by parodying'' (2010: 8). However, figures such as T.S. Eliot did not outright oppose past traditions, at least from an intellectual perspective, despite their non-conformist literary techniques and subject matter. Instead, their objective was to safeguard existing traditions from reinvention (Bedecarré 2012: 5-7). Eliot was an ardent supporter of tradition, particularly in the realms of religion, politics, and culture. He vehemently criticized the gradual erosion of historic values and often reflected on this with melancholy, harbouring concerns that the advances of industrialization and modernity might precipitate humanity's oblivion. Similarly, William Butler Yeats also held a sceptical view of modernity. Reflecting on Dublin city, which was on the verge of modernisation, he expresses disdain for its "discordant architecture" and "all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form", which cast only "vague hatred" over him (Greenblatt 2006: 2058). Conversely, authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are known for their portrayal of relatively liberal and novel experiences. This complicates the definition and boundaries of Modernism, as they take a diverse approach to the movement. According to John Bedecarré, Eckstein describes Modernism as "focused on the themes of liberation, breaking convention, sexual emancipation and obsession with forward

movement“ (Bedecarré 2012: 10), a perspective which aligns with many of the prevalent discussions in Haile’s novel. However, when compared to T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, Haile remains similarly ambivalent regarding issues of the past and modernity. As previously discussed, Mezghebe’s torch is one of the most salient symbols in the novel. In this context, light is used as a metaphor for knowledge. The fact that Mezghebe walks among the villagers carrying a torch in broad daylight symbolically castigates the society for the conservative traditions they uphold. His deviation from traditional burial procedures, the subjugation of women in traditional Tigrinya society, and his symbolic transition from rural to urban life imply his negative stance towards the conventions of cultural tradition. Nevertheless, as a decisive character in the novel, the protagonist is also portrayed as someone who disregards the country’s modernization process. After transitioning from villager to urban settler, he is depicted as avoiding products of modernity. For instance, when his aunt asks him to learn to drive, he refuses, saying he has not been enlightened to drive any vehicle. While he was staying with his aunt, she expressed how happy she was to have him visit and insisted on showing him all the places and cinemas in Asmara, the capital city which was rapidly becoming a centre of Modernism. However, neither the modernist buildings nor the movies captured his interest. In a club, she sadly described him as so detached from his peers that he became deeply isolated. Near his death, Mezghebe abandoned the city altogether to live on the outskirts where he could witness none of the effects of modernity. Although the novel depicts many characters who achieve economic stability through education, the protagonist remains largely indifferent to it. The novel’s scholars, Qidisti, Tesfai, Tiibe, Fisiha, Kiflom, and Tekali, have an exalted approach to modern education, which is in stark contrast to Mezghebe’s limited appetite for it. The protagonist resists further education, declining his aunt's offer to send him abroad for higher education (pp. 89-90). Throughout his life, he rejects whatever emerges as common and normal in the modern city. Even when he dresses himself in modern clothes (a coat and a hat), they are an abnormal size and do not fit into modern society. To some extent, therefore, the novel is reactionary in that it amalgamates itself with contemporary novels on the subject of resentment against emerging modernity in the country and on the continent as a whole. Yet, it is also a revolutionary novel that fantasizes delightfully about the individuals breaking creatively free from long-held traditional conventions. This ambivalence is another universal feature that characterizes this novel and other modernist literary pieces around the world.

Conclusion: Reimagining African Literature

The 1960s were a politically and culturally turbulent decade in Eritrea's history. This period followed the end of ten years of federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1952-1962). Ethiopia annexed Eritrea by dissolving its parliament, removing its flag, and revoking the official status of its languages (Tigrinya and Arabic). This annexation and subsequent repression sparked political and armed movements among Eritreans that lasted for the following three decades. Culturally, the country's artistic traditions were rapidly transforming into a new style, intermingling with modern instruments and styles learned from Europeans, as well as the influence of American Jazz and Blues music. Eritreans who had long been exposed to the new Western culture – urban culture, architecture, music, theatre, sports, and food – from a marginalized position began to manifest it. Beyene Haile's novel *Abidu'do Tibliwo*, the focus of this article, was a continuation of these cultural and artistic modernization processes in the 1960s.

However, many of the elites and authors were concerned about the developing socio-political changes, hence were preoccupied with their resentment of the emerging cultural trends and political trajectories. In contrast to his contemporaries, who were bound by postcolonial issues stemming from their colonial experiences, Haile committed himself to the pursuit of total aesthetic literature. While other literary and artistic genres (music, theatre, novel, and poetry) predominantly highlighted societal and political circumstances, he accentuated universalism by defying conventional communal and parochial content. Haile aspired to expand the literary scope of the era with his cosmopolitan modernist novel. Adhering to an aesthetic philosophy, he strove to pioneer a literary text that embodied the ideals of individualism. Accordingly, the novel marks a thought paradigm shift from an ages-old indigenous communalist identity to Western individualism. This ideological shift was the resultant effect of long-term Western colonial influence, cultural hegemony, and modernization, and was deeply embedded in the 20th-century belief that Western civilization was primarily entrenched on the tradition of individualism. In essence, Haile's novel propounds art as a self-sufficient entity that presents the complexities of the modern man as an individual, thereby emphasizing the centrality of modernist literature.

It has now been over half a century since this revolutionary novel was first published. Initially, the novel faced rejection, being perceived as both literarily and morally incongruent with the prevailing values of the time. This negative reception was attributed to the fact that the novel defied conventional literary

and moral standards, which made it challenging for much of the population to comprehend. Its stylistic unconventionality and experimental approach—including its complex narrative structure, aesthetic values in art and literature, its anti-traditional perspectives, and focus on individualism—remained a long-standing challenge within the country's dominant traditional literary history. It is also worth noting that Haile employed intricate narration, complex plots, and despondent imagery to effectively convey the inner conflicts experienced by a population torn between conventional societal traditions and emerging individualistic practices. This tension symbolically reflects the shaky ground of modernity amidst the evolving literary and social shifts of the period in Eritrea. As the first modernist Tigrinya novel, *Abidu'do Tibliwo* offers a unique perspective on the experience of modernity in the 1960s Horn of Africa and the societal impacts of this period, which were characterized by ambivalence and perplexity. Despite its historical significance as a modernist novel set in a specific temporal and socio-cultural context, it has largely been overlooked and undervalued within the realm of modernist world literature. Thus, this article aims to encourage a broader intellectual research and debate on the multilayered 20th-century sociocultural and literary experiences from the margins, in order to foster a scholarly and academic reimagination of African literature.

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