“The golden generation” of Tower in the Sky

Name of the book: Tower in the Sky

Author: Hiwot Teffera

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To begin with

“There was a generation in Ethiopia that came out once in time with a beautiful dream. As history did not allow that dream come true, it turned to a nightmare. And that generation boiled away writing largely a history of tragedy and sacrifice. It killed each other; it cleared the way for its slayers (Ethiopia’s destroyers) and gave in itself at last. The sacrifice was not only fruitless but also extremely virulent.

“However, that generation was not homogeneous both in its world view and the role it played in history. As much as there was a firm stand for a purpose, as much there was commitment and love for the people, there was also opportunism, hesitancy and egocentrism. As a result, all who had set out for the journey did not travel together to the end point. Among those who escaped execution some ended up in exile, some led their lives in different spheres, others sheltered themselves around the power circle, and still some others betrayed that wonderful cause and condemned it as if it was a “childish game” merely as they wanted to ease their way for subsistence. The rest abandoned the whole past behind and reassured themselves with the situation. Some others yet calculated their “limit” and refrained from matters of the past but sighing inside.”

Dr. Eshetu Chole, a prelude to Dr. Fekade Azeze’s Chuhet-Cry, A poetry book, published in 1993, (Translation by the writer of this piece)

The story
Tower in the Sky is a story of a generation to which reference is made by Eshetu Chole in the prologue cited above as having a beautiful dream. A generation which emerged in the 1960s and toiled fervently in the 1970s to transform the Ethiopian society; a generation that bloomed like the spring flowers and spurted out as shooting stars for a while but short lived like those stars melting away in obscurity of the darkness. That was a generation which envisioned Ethiopia to be on top list of the blissful world via the transformational wave and ideological canopy of Marxism. That was a generation that wished to march far off the distance but stumbled at the door yard. That was the generation of Hiwot Tefferra, the author of Tower in the Sky.

Hiwot Teffera, the main “character” of the book comes from the city of Harar to Addis Ababa to join the then Haile Sellasie I University, Sidist Kilo, Campus in 1972 when she was only 18. She was an innocent and cheerful young girl who seemed to enjoy all the “modern” styles available in her home town in those days. As a teenager, she didn’t see student demonstrations and class boycotts to be any different from a sort of picnic walks and she had never missed those riotous walks. It was apolitical for her and she enjoyed the commotion like any teen of her age. However, having landed on the hot spot of the student politics, Haile Sellassie I University, she was recruited to the secretive study circle under the mentorship of Getachew Maru, a highly sophisticated student activist who was also a young man himself but well equipped with Marxist Leninist Philosophy and the ideas beyond.

Getachew who was an engineering student brought Hiwot to a different being indoctrinating her with Marxism and elevating her world view and imagination to a higher level where she devoted her entire life for a cause. That was the cause of a society. That cause had no an egoistic foundation. Nor it was aiming at a minuscule transformation. It was about radical change they fantasized afar the horizons. They wished a brighter future where democracy, justice, equality and prosperity would reign. They dedicated their entire being to the realization of an idyllic world where each would contribute according to his ability and each would reap in return according to his needs.
Hiwot was a member of a circle which initially operated under the auspices of Abyot, a clandestine movement that largely embraced younger intellectuals and ran by the same until later they merged with Ethiopian People’s Liberation Organization (EPLO) to form the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

**My impression**

To my sense, the book is, written with a captivating power in a way that one never dares to close the pages unless forced by circumstances. I personally felt I was passionately reading a novel, not a true story, which the very person who wrote the book had gone through. For a while I felt I was reading an adventurous story full of ups and downs, rather intentionally crafted by a good imaginative author. It is full of suspense and worries where a dreadful demise is playing a cat and mice game with life. Throughout the leaves I was thrilled when the main “character” Hiwot and her comrades escaped traps, hunt downs and executions. I sometimes wondered how the “angles” cared for Hiwot in those perilous missions she was assigned to.

“Death was the list price we could pay for the noble cause; for the people. Our comrades’ unmarked mass graves were etched in red. ‘I will wash the path to freedom with my blood so that you can live happily ever after’ was their oath.

Hiwot describes that oath as ‘a statement to the heights to which the human heart could soar’ a statement that they lived to with a determination of ‘we must perish in order to make room for the people fit for a new world’.

Hiwot defines that spirit of dying for a cause putting it up in heavens as they thought they were not like the Jews whom ‘Moses led through the wilderness.’

They dubbed themselves as if they were the new generation! “We did not think we were to be surpassed. We chose to perish because we believed in the cause, not for glory or gain immortality. We surrendered our lives out of pure dedication to the struggle. It was a sublime, even a holy act” (Tower in the Sky, p 264).

That was the generation—the generation which believed it had an honest cause, a cause that had been flagged up high in the sky. Hiwot and her likes were in such a state of mind, excited to the limit to move the gears of the revolution affront, though not all the steps the EPRP generation had undergone were to be ascribed to the same inspiration.

**What inference can be made?**

Though, Tower in the Sky is an account of Hiot Teffera’s real life story and that of her friends, it is an account of a critical era in Ethiopian history. The book has got a detailed account of events and personalities too. It has recorded a good deal of the Ethiopian students’ movement, its motives and mottos before the 1974 revolution and the power struggle, skirmishes, plots and entanglements during the early days of the revolution. It gives specific
analyses of the paths that the “progressive forces” sought to pursue to bring about communism for the good of the people. It also depicts the atrocities committed largely by the military junta and considerably by the “comrades” themselves.

I was really enthused, captivated, disappointed, laughed and at times wept as I went through the leaves. I saw heroic deeds, dramatic events and tragic ends. In fact, amidst all the trying and hasty circumstances I come across in the book, I also shared with them all the tricks and humor that Hiwot and her friends enjoyed as youngsters. I laughed with them; I frowned with them and scoffed with them too.

**The sorrow is aching**

Indeed, I couldn’t bear the loss of some of Hiwot’s friends. I wept bitterly when I learnt Azeb was executed. I burst into tears upon hearing Semegne’s execution. I mourned with a deep rage when I learnt Getachew Maru, a genius young man was executed in the hands of his own friends (comrades) for holding a different view and condemning the shortsighted policy of the “comrades”-the comrades whom he had trusted until they betrayed him.

In Tower in the Sky, we see love entwined with a heightened drive, two souls tied together one believing in the other, until things torn apart in a tragic pitfall.

Moreover, one can easily realize the interplay of passion vs. disgust, anguish vs. hope, and agony vs. respite in the swiftly changing circumstances of those testing days-the particular moment of the early revolution era.

I have read many books that directly or indirectly report an account of the period of the revolution including the fictional ones such as Kasa Hailemariam’s *Zekre Seba* (Memoirs of the 70s). However, I have never come across a book like Tower in the Sky, which is written by the victim and survivor of the predicament of the political conflict.

**The bearing it has with today**

It is a pity that Ethiopia failed to treasure those super genius minds of the golden generation. Yes, as Hiwot strikingly put it in the book, those were not people of low prestige or spirit. “They were indeed tragic heroes. No matter what their flaws, they were the ‘golden generation’-a generation of shameless idealists’ with a great vision and altruism. They killed and died for equality, freedom, social justice and human dignity. Ethiopia always remembers them with weeping eyes for their selflessness and vision and with a forgiving heart for their follies. Alas! She was orphaned of children, in the twinkling of an eye. The curtain fell on her. She receded into darkness. The revolution ‘froze’” (Tower in the Sky p. 295)

In fact, one may not necessarily buy the idea of killing persons to ensure freedom and justice. However, one can certainly appreciate the cause for which that huge sacrifice was paid. It should definitely teach us a lesson that bloodshed and elimination cannot bring solutions to our political differences. The book also gives us a good lesson how collective
thinking overrides individual rationality leading to committing malicious damages like the one the EPRP suffered from.

As intensely detailed in the book, having suffered a great misfortune, EPRP’s structures were crushed in the cities and towns. Its leaders including Hiwot were stuffed in appalling custodies (Kebele and Kefitegna offices) where many of them faced awful tortures and executions. The “fortunate” ones, who survived the mighty force of the military junta, were thrown to formal jails, Hiwot being one of them. In the Kerchele (main prison in Addis Ababa) Hiwot also shares with us her experiences of eight years’ pain, where she depicts suppression, brutality and human plights through different personalities. More importantly, in the gloomy atmosphere of the Kerchelle life one could see unbeatable hope, unreserved kindness, mysterious behavior and solid cooperation. Here is where Hiwot wonders how sophisticated and furtive human nature is.

**Unsolved puzzles**

Having read Tower in the Sky, I came to question why the problems we experienced three or so decade before are still unresolved. Why obstinacy and notoriety, hateful and uncompromising attitude is still baffling in the political circle of ours? Dialogue is, hitherto, the dearest thing one can hardly expect among our elites. Opportunism has remained to be a deadly syndrome in the Ethiopian politics. With no illusion, I am tempted to guess if it is a generational curse that we lack a culture of tolerance and compromise. I still wonder if we are able to respect, appreciate and tolerate views that are different from that of ours. I am not sure if we could give the Ethiopian public the chance to decide for itself, to choose the type of “ideology” it wishes to be guided by, instead of imposing on it our own hegemonies. It seems the shadows of the pitfall Ethiopia endured about four decades ago have not yet fully evaporated from the public mind.

**In conclusion**

Finally, I appreciate the memory of the author that she recalls all the miniature incidents, like dates, names and actions of specific persons after such a long time. I hope other persons who were close to the issue of the “golden generation” will also be motivated by Hiwot’s work and share with us their version of the story.