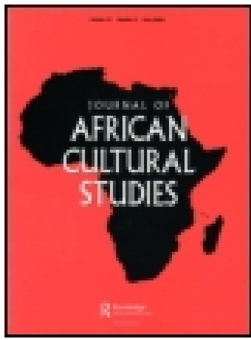

Journal of African Cultural Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjac20

Campus Movements and Student Revolutionaries: Imagining Haile Selassie I University in Hiwot Teffera's Memoir *Tower in the Sky*

Luleadey Tadesse Worku

To cite this article: Luleadey Tadesse Worku (2023): Campus Movements and Student Revolutionaries: Imagining Haile Selassie I University in Hiwot Teffera's Memoir *Tower in the Sky*, Journal of African Cultural Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2022.2151423

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2022.2151423

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 02 Feb 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cjac20

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CULTURAL STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2022.2151423

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Campus Movements and Student Revolutionaries: Imagining Haile Selassie I University in Hiwot Teffera's Memoir *Tower in the Sky*

Luleadey Tadesse Worku

Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

ABSTRACT
The 1974 revolution in Ethiopia has been the topic of many histories and novels set during this period which have portrayed these events for readers beyond Ethiopia. Hiwot Teffera's autobiographical text, *Tower in the Sky*, tells the story of student revolutionaries in the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) and the 1974 revolution that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie. The revolutionaries' untold stories of love, intense political optimism and suffering permeate the narrative and demonstrate the significance of memoirs in documenting individual experiences which are otherwise overlooked by other narrative forms despite their impact on political developments and outcomes. This article examines the ESM's modes of mobilisation and engagement through an analysis of Teffera's journey as a political activist and a revolutionary. In so doing, it shows how Teffera identifies her class relationship, her gender and her romantic relationship as the dominant factors behind her political coming to awareness and her lifelong commitment to the student movement and to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The article also argues that Haile Selassie I University has served the movement as a vital mental and physical space in shaping the students' political consciousness.

KEYWORDS
Tower in the Sky; Ethiopian student movement; women's autobiographical writings

Introduction

In this article, I analyse a rather unknown autobiographical account of the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia, in order to supplement the dominant representations of the events. Representations of the 1974 revolution are nuanced through the analysis of Hiwot Teffera's autobiographical narrative, *Tower in the Sky*, which was published (in English and subsequently translated into Amharic) by Addis Ababa University Press in 2012. Hiwot Teffera is a former member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the memoir is a personal account of her involvement in the student revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and her role in the EPRP party as well as her imprisonment and torture by the Derg regime. The text is unusual in its depiction of the personal side of the revolution, in particular the experiences of the women who took part.

CONTACT Luleadey Tadesse Worku lworku@qu.edu.qa

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

The 1974 revolution has been the topic of many histories, and novels set during this period have portrayed these events for readers beyond Ethiopia. The novel most readers beyond Ethiopia are likely to mention is *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, written in English by Maaza Mengiste (2010). Mengiste's novel opens in 1974, and centres around student demonstrations and famine – the themes that recur in representations of the period. Historians have generally been in agreement that the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) played a crucial role in instigating the revolution as well as in shaping Ethiopia's socio-political conditions (see Zewde 2014), although more recent scholarship such as the work of Ayalew has begun to complicate this view (2021). By connecting the student movement to different factors including economic conditions, ethnicity, gender and religion, historians of the period such as Randi Rønning Balsvik and Bahru Zewde attribute the inception of the student movement to the absence of strong institutional frameworks. Ayalew, on the other hand, argues that the literature on the 1974 revolution privileges students as the main instigators of political action, but that there were many other groups who took active part in the social protests of 1974 and students alone were not the vanguards (2001).

The memoir confirms the dominant historiographical view of the dominant role that Haile Selassie I University played in the revolutionary movement, not just in terms of planting the seeds of student militancy in the students, but also in transforming the rather politically innocent students such as Teffera into hardline members, and later, into unflinching radicals. Teffera's *Tower in the Sky* is a powerful life record of a young girl's coming of age, which coincides with the final heyday of the ESM. Through the detailed account of Teffera's university days, the memoir recounts the lives of student revolutionaries and their bittersweet political struggle, vividly commenting on the political and sociocultural circumstances of the period.

Life writings are inextricably embedded within history and linked to the broader context in which their authors write and live (see Smith and Watson 2001) although the "facts" are often presented in a way that is more "emotional" and "subjective" than is the case in conventional historiography. Yet life narratives in general and memories in particular are crucial archival sources through which we are able to negotiate the nuances of history through remembrance and individuals' contemplations of stories anchored in a particular historical context. While historical narratives preoccupy themselves with "objective truth", often overlooking ambiguities of history, memoirs often bring these nuances to light and contribute to a more complex understanding of history.

As Smith and Watson argue, a memoir is "a mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject, as either observer or participant" (2001, 198). Through personal remembering, memoirists negotiate the discourses that surround them and the periods in which they live. For this reason, a memoir could also be proof of agency and self-assertion, especially for objectified subjects including women, who, through their autobiographical acts, subvert popular misconceptions about them and reclaim their struggles as worthy of historical considerations. This becomes even more crucial in recording major historical events, which often depict women in rather marginalised roles regardless of their involvement and contributions in the making of history. The history of the ESM is not any different from this. Over the years, there have been various attempts to document and reconstruct the stories surrounding the movement. However, in much of the movement's historiography, the attention women often receive for the roles they played is rather slight

compared to the sacrifices they made in order for the movement to thrive. One such attempt to excavate women's contribution is Zewde Bahru's oral history project that has brought together the veterans of the movement in order to reflect on their experiences. The veterans' oral testimonies covered different themes, including the gender dynamics of the movement, and reflecting on it, almost all of the women participants reminisced about the ways in which their contributions have been degraded. For instance, one of the participants, Wolde Giorgis, points out:

> [E]ven now, the role women have played has not been given the attention it deserves. Kiflu Tadesse [one of the active members of the movement], who has witnessed these things abroad and at home, did not find it important enough to write about the numerous dead and maimed women, or about the countless females beaten black and blue, or those left hanging from ceilings, or about those crippled as a result of hideous torture. Their ordeal has remained un-chronicled, unless we ourselves write it. I find it very hard to give credence to claims that women were given the opportunity to participate in the movement as far back as 1973 when a recently written work makes no mention of women's contribution to the struggle. (Zewde 2010, 125–126)

What this oral history project has done is to supplement, through an act of collective remembering and reminiscing, the absence of scholarly attention to the roles women played in the movement. In this respect, life narratives such as Teffera's *Tower in the Sky* emerge as essential testimonies of women's contributions to the movement's bloody struggle. By writing this memoir, Teffera has come forth and challenged the stifling politics of memorialising the revolutionary period, which every so often privileges men with the "authority" of remembering and forgetting. Through making evident that memory is selective and therefore potentially discriminatory, the memoir negotiates the different versions of the movement's national memory as well as the discourses surrounding women's role in the movement.

In order to understand the contribution made by *Tower in the Sky*, it is instructive to compare it briefly to Tadelech Haile Michael's *ዳኛው ማነው?* (*Who is the Judge*?), another noteworthy contribution to women's life writing and the student movement. In parallel to Teffera's, Haile Michael's memoir recounts her active participation in the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe (ESUE). Her account relates her long years of struggle in the student movement and her romantic involvement with the late Berhane Meskel Redda, one of the leading figures of the student movement and later of the EPRP. In her prologue, Haile Michael affirms that the significance of her work primarily lies in honouring the life of her spouse and the father of her children, Berhane Meskel. However, she also expresses her wish to rectify the burgeoning misconceptions that continue to revolve around the ESM and EPRP. Through documenting the murderous political struggle into which he entered, in the hope of bringing about equality and justice, and through the intimate relationship she has built with him, Haile Michael reconstructs Redda's life both as captivating and somber.

There are many striking similarities between Teffera's and Haile Michael's memoirs, and many convergences between their stories, but since Haile Michael studied in Switzerland where she joined the struggle and where she met Redda, her account mainly focuses on the ESUE. In contrast, Teffera's account depicts events that were transpiring in Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa. Aside from honouring the lives of their late lovers and the hefty prices they paid in the name of the movement and EPRP, both memoirs shed light

on the major contributions women made to the struggle. Both Redda and Maru (Teffera's lover) were persecuted and expelled from the EPRP for having views which were different from the views of the dominant "clique" within the EPRP. Although both men lost their lives for the same cause but in different circumstances, Haile Michael and Teffera miraculously survived and crossed paths in prison where they started drafting their future works. Haile Michael writes in the preface to her memoir:

> I remember the dedication my friend Hiwot [Teffera] and I had to keep a written record of our memories under the difficult circumstances of prison life. Every Monday, we would exchange and reflect on each other's notes for accuracy. Nonetheless, it was mostly a futile act as we had to destroy the notes before they were confiscated during the regular searches. (2020, 12, translation mine)

The lifetime devotion each woman pledges to honour her partner (as hero of the struggle) is evident in their determination to document the past even under hazardous circumstances. More importantly however, these memoirs have given voice to the women revolutionaries who were left unacknowledged, and in both works, perhaps contrary to mainstream opinion, women emerge as active political participants, committed lovers, fierce revolutionaries, fortunate survivors, prisoners and finally chroniclers of this important era of the Ethiopian history.

Both memoirs confirm, as do the historians of the time, the fundamental role Haile Selassie I University as a space played in both the developmental and radicalisation stages of the student movement. The student movement gained its momentum on the university campus, which served it as a major springboard in mobilising students for the arduous political task that would later topple imperial rule. Therefore, as part of this special issue on representations of university campuses, I turn now to analyse the depiction of the university as radicalising space in the memoir *Tower in the Sky*.

Tower in the Sky: The Memoir

Tower in the Sky recounts the crucial moments of the student movement in its final years through the memoirist's life. It particularly depicts the grim political circumstances of the 1970s in which young revolutionaries took the responsibility of liberating fellow Ethiopians from the yoke of feudalism and Haile Selassie's aristocratic rule, which by then had existed for four decades. James McCann, reviewing the memoir in a historical journal notes: "The book's narrative is, in fact, an insightful and nuanced perspective from the narcissism of youth (and a valuable female view)" (2013, 117). The memoir recounts Teffera's journey as a student activist and later as a zealous EPRP member. Coming to Haile Selassie I University, Teffera writes, she was filled with high hopes for an enlivening university life, one which is adorned with vibrancy of political activism, of animated protests which could be far greater in magnitude than the ones she had taken part in in Harar as a high school student. However, at first, she writes that she found campus life unnervingly quiet; her expectations were greatly shattered by the dormant few months of her first year in the university, which left her rather disappointed. Nevertheless, she soon learnt the intricate ways through which the student activism on campus functioned. The campus "revos" (the shortened version of the word revolutionaries) were yet to be readmitted in spring, just a few

months away, and in that spring the campus ambience was to change beyond recognition.

She learnt the crucial details as to why the “revos” had withdrawn in the fall, only to be readmitted in spring of each passing academic year. That way, so she was informed, they could prolong their stay on campus and so recruit more members and sustain the struggle’s momentum. Hence, it was in the weeks following the resumption of the spring semester that the campus revives back to life. And when it did, seeing the “revos” in their Afros and corduroy trousers walking with a great air of confidence, in the knowledge that they shoulder one of the greatest responsibilities of their generation, became a daily thrill for Teffera and her cohort of first year students. Teffera could not help being envious of the “revos” for appearing to be unquestionably important. However, before she fully understood the weight of this decision, she had joined the underground movement and becomes a member.

How Teffera met Getachew Maru and how she instantly fell in love with him is key to her entry to the movement. She writes about how Getachew opened her eyes to the ideals of socialism and Marxist ideology and to the vast world, which she had never known existed before. Through their weekly studies at the small mud house at Afincho Ber, a neighbourhood in the vicinity of the university campus, she gradually emerged as an enthusiastic member of the underground movement. So serious and committed was she to her underground studies that she soon started judging her surrounding against the ideals of the party. In the same way, for her, the party became inseparable from Getachew, and hence, her world suddenly merged with that of the party and Getachew. She writes: “He represented to me not only the party but also what was best in it. The love I had for him was meshed with the love I had for the party. It was hardly possible to distinguish between them” (162–163).

The Role of Haile Selassie I University Campus in the Student Movement

Although Teffera’s journey as a political activist started in the early 1970s, just a few years before the revolution erupted, the genesis of the student movement can be traced back to the decisive 1960s that freed most of Africa from colonial subjugation. The wave of political freedom and independence movements across Africa during what is commonly known as the Year of Africa soon reached Ethiopia, with the ideals of revolution and the ardent need for political as well as economic transformation, although Ethiopia had famously never been colonised. With the realisation of the end of European colonial rule across the African continent, Ethiopians also engaged in impassioned student protests and underground movements to overthrow the Emperor and his decade-long aristocratic rule. Ironically this was partly facilitated by the Emperor’s generous grant of scholarships for students from the newly freed African countries, who joined Haile Selassie I University in those years. Unbeknownst to the aging Emperor, the scholarship students brought with them the revolution fervour and political consciousness of which Ethiopian students of the time had previously had little or no knowledge (Zewde 2014, 222).

Zewde also attributes the birth of the student movement to the aborted coup of 1960 (see more on the aborted coup in Zewde 2001), following which students of Haile Selassie I University began to open their eyes to the possibility of a new

order. The discontent that gave birth to the coup soon found its way through and started reverberating within the walls of the university campus. Here, it is to be noted that the lodging and food facilities that the university provided played a crucial role in forging unity and solidarity among students "through frequent inter-group contact" (Adamu and Balsvik 2017, 266).

More specifically, as we read in *Tower in the Sky*, Haile Selassie I University played a decisive role in both the materialisation and continuation of the student movement. This it did by providing a physical space for the students to meet and discuss in their different study clubs, while the campus also provided an instrumental mental space through the fluid access it granted them to books and other forms of informative media such as films which were crucial for their struggles. The memoir's portrayal of the enabling context the university facilitated is congruent with Haile Michael's (2020) view of the institution as the most pivotal for the creation of the student movement. Haile Michael writes that the "idea of academic freedom, which came into existence during the Monarchic rule ha[d] enabled the university to become a critical space for political views to be openly exchanged and disputed for the good of the country" (2020, 419, translation mine). In connection with this, perhaps as an aspect of academic freedom, the university's long-standing literary culture also encouraged students to use art, in particular poetry, as a powerful means of self-expression. This had undoubtedly encouraged students to use Amharic poetry to express their grievances against the system. Balsvik (1985) writes that a poetry club had existed for many years, "and students used to recite their rhymes on Saturday evenings in the dining hall" (1985, 106). During the annual College Day celebrations, the three winning poems used to be recited before the Emperor and his dignitaries; however, due to the serious political critique in the poetry, serious administrative measures including censorship were later imposed (Balsvik 1985, 106–109).

Addis Ababa University Press published a collection of these poems for the celebration of the university's fiftieth anniversary in 2001. The poems mainly speak of the extreme poverty and manifest economic disparities which were prevalent in twentieth century Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie I. For instance, Tamiru Feyissa's "The Poor Man Speaks" (6–11) and "Life" (44–50) by Yilma Kebede, aside from depicting the miserable lives of the majority poor, clearly shed light on the level of political awareness that university students of the time had. Although these student-poets and their official poem recitations preceded Teffera's time in the university at least by a decade, surmising the continuation of the culture as an important aspect of campus life and effective mode of criticism could still be possible.

The portrayal of Haile Selassie I University in *Tower in the Sky* vividly shows its critical role in the evolution of the student movement, and it has often been argued that without the political space it granted to students, the entire idea of organised student activism would have been unattainable. The student movement gained its momentum and maintained it because of the high level of political consciousness and revolutionary spirit that permeated the university campus, both through the underground study circles and through group debates. In my analysis below I examine Teffera's political epiphany by focusing on her experience, first as a first-year student at the university, then as a member of the underground movement and finally as a devoted member of EPRP.

Early Days of Campus Life: The Age of Political Innocence

Tower in the Sky offers a gripping narrative about students' characterisation of the ESM as "larger than life". As Balsvik (1985, 46-47) notes, in the 1969–1970 student in-take, the majority of the student population came from poor families who lived a life of subsistence and below subsistence levels, while 10% and 26.5% of the students came from wealthy and upper middle class families respectively. Bearing in mind the social influence of Teffera's family, it is not difficult to place her in the latter two family categories, either as rich or upper middle class, and this made her doubly removed from the reality on the ground. Her romantic view of the movement was therefore a natural consequence of growing up privileged and with ready access to recreational Western films and books, in which life was often represented in glamorising ways. However, one may also argue that the secrecy surrounding the movement and the constant battle she soon finds herself in to gain the revos' recognition are what contributed to her perception of the movement as both exciting and unattainable.

Another explanation for Teffera's view of the movement as "larger-than-life" could be the stereotyping of women as uninterested in serious political and social matters. The negative attitude towards female university students mirrored the popular view of women in the traditionally conservative society, which only saw them in the kitchen (Balsvik 1985, 53–60). As Balsvik notes, this view of women was particularly widespread when the movement was in its infancy. She adds that the interaction between the sexes was greatly affected by the existing disparity in the economic status of the students. For instance, most of the male students were from the rural part of the country where the living conditions were dire, while the majority of the female students came from urban settings and well-to-do families as these families were in a position to support their daughters to be educated. This, according to Balsvik, made the male students more attuned to the country's prevalent poverty. As a result, they assumed the responsibility of redressing the economic imbalance as their sole responsibility, while they continued undermining the intellectual capacity of the female students to fathom politics. Here, the constant mockery of Teffera and her friends as "jolly-jacks" (1985, 8) could be clear evidence of stereotyping women as shallow. However, the sarcasm behind this particular label is also suggestive of the existing economic privilege that male students resented, and which alienated them from their peer female students. Labelled as vain and ignorant, the tendency of romanticising the student movement therefore was understandable in Teffera and her friends' response.

Despite the affirmations by Balsvik (1985, 57) and Mengistu (in Zewde 2010, 119) that the name-calling and stereotyping of female students had significantly improved after the1960s, female students were still being scolded and given nicknames for their unbecoming and unintelligent ways well into the 1970s when Teffera joined the university. Mengistu, for instance, argues that 1970/71 was "not a bad year in terms of gender discrimination". According to her, the year saw a "proliferation of study groups" which was a significant mark of progress in the movement in terms of encouraging the participation of female students (in Zewde 2010, 119). Mengistu's remarks clearly point to the changing gender dynamics in the 1970s when female students of the time enjoyed acceptance and recognition unlike their 1960s predecessors. On the other hand, referring to her own student years at the university in the 1960s, Mengistu recalls:

> *Struggle*[1] contributed its fair share in belittling women. Everyone knows the cartoonist Zewdie Hailu. He invariably portrayed women as creatures with cosmetics, miniskirts and parties (some of his cartoons showed girls scaling the wall after coming late from a party). His message was: that is the sum total of their achievements. The same period of time witnessed women being harshly condemned in verse. For all that, we took part in public demonstrations … We, women may have been reticent, but we did not lack commitment. Not only did we participate in demonstrations, but we were at the forefront (in Zewde 2010, 118).

However, although the 1960s quickly passed, leaving behind major turns of events including the death of Tilahun Gizaw in 1969, much remained the same concerning female stereotypes. We see this recounted in the opening pages of *Tower in the Sky*. It is also worthy of mention that Teffera's narrative differs from Mengistu's on some level. To illustrate, whereas Mengistu viewed the association of fashion with the feminine as critically stereotypical and hence derogatory, Teffera appeared to be unbothered by such stereotypes as she proudly tells the reader that fashion was the sole preoccupation for her group. For example, Teffera passionately reminisced about some of her early "achievements" on campus which included, "toppling the dress code for women, which was mainly skirt suit, and brought in bell bottoms, mini skirts, windbreakers, bandanas, sneakers, platform shoes, and flip-flips to an unprecedented degree" (2012, 12). True, her obsession with fashion changed once she became involved in the movement, yet one cannot simply dismiss the attitudes towards female students as wholly groundless, especially when Teffera confessed her own obsessions with "trifles":

> Diligent students buried their heads in books in the library, while my friends and I invaded the student lounge and the kissing pool. As a rule, we came out of the cafeteria around seven and hung around the student lounge … until eight o'clock listening to music and giggling. Then we strolled to the kissing pool with our dates … The fountain was so-called because it was sanctuary to couples who made out in the dark away from the glare of the Revos, who considered romance a frivolous pursuit. It was also the symbol of freedom for us teenagers who had just shaken off the shackles of parental control. (2012, 13)

For Teffera, life needed to be all about socialising and merrymaking, lest the familiarity of comfort be risked, so she was the least prepared when approached by the revolutionaries. She received her enlistment with equal level of excitement and resentment, as is evident in the somewhat perfunctory allegiances she forged to the study circle at first:

> We thought it was funny. Why would he want to study with girls he doesn't even know? We also felt edgy about the seriousness with which he spoke about reading handouts and taking notes. We didn't even take lecture notes properly. I hated the idea of chairing meeting. "Why doesn't he chair the meetings?" I asked. But more importantly, we were mystified and scared by the "It should be kept secret" warning. (2012, 29)

Even though the student movement had reached a peak and became a vociferous critic of the Imperial regime by the year 1969 (Zewde 2014), three years earlier than Teffera's admission at the university, the seriousness of the political task with which she was entrusted did not seem to crystalise into something more concrete until much later. This is perhaps to be expected since what seemed more appealing for her at this stage was the mere political decorum and the prestige that came with becoming an advocate of a prominent movement. Yet, even after the weeks and months of studies with Getachew, she was more invested in him than she was in the underground movement he was preparing her for. It is also evident that her consent to the demanding task of

reading and debating Marxist theory was more of an attempt to create a positive impression on him than any serious ideological pursuit.

Whereas Teffera and her friends seemed to fit the stereotypical accusation of middle class narcissism that came with economic privilege, to which the revos were fundamentally hostile, the widespread dismissive attitude towards female students played a crucial role not only in alienating them but also in enticing them to romanticise the movement. Although the encounters with the revos at times could be judgmental and offensive, they still promoted a sense of admiration and envy in the politically innocent students like Teffera, making them desperately curious in exploring what lay beneath the underground movement.

Romance and Political Maturity

The course of events that brought Teffera to the scene of student activism were almost incidental. Given the rampant stereotyping of female students on campus which saw them as decadent, politically ignorant and unabashedly vain, and because Teffera conformed to most of these stereotypes by virtue of being from the moneyed class, it is surprising to witness her eventual development and candidacy for membership in the movement. There was active participation of female students including Haile Michael (2020), Mengistu, Wolde Giorgis and Taddese (in Zewde 2010) both locally and abroad. Nevertheless, whether their male counterparts regarded the female members as equal is still a subject of controversy as Mengistu, Wolde Giorgis and Taddese would argue. Taddese, for example, recalls the absence of leadership roles for female members saying:

> To all intents and purposes, the presence of women was acknowledged only when a fund-raising event was to take place. Then women would attend such an event for a two-fold purpose: cooking and dancing. Other than that, I did not ever witness women being given the chance to participate, demanding an entry into the dialogue, or being elected to office. (in Zewde 2010, 123)

In contrast, Haile Michael's account of her membership in the movement reveals the crucial roles she played and the high level of responsibility she was charged with regardless of her gender. In fact, her account of the roles she played bears considerable resemblance to the role Teffera later played in the movement. Tayetu, the girl who recruited Teffera's group for membership is also one such female student who was held in high esteem in the movement; she was perceived as emancipated, and awe-inspiring for Teffera and her friends, who had hitherto been ostracised for being bourgeois. In any case, in view of this contrasting opinions, one can clearly see the treatment to which female members were subjected within the movement, and perhaps, contrary to the argument by Taddese and others, gender may not always be the only factor to determine the female students' roles in the movement. In any case, Teffera's attraction to politics was not born out of ideological consciousness and the commitment to bring about the much sought-after socioeconomic change alone. Rather, it came out of the sheer ambition to be adventurous as the excerpt below clearly suggests:

> "You are open-minded. We hear your debates at night and we find you very open-minded." she surprised us.

She looked each of us in the eye and asked, "would you be interested in joining a study circle?"

Study circle? What is a study circle? "Sure!" we were there to experience life after all. (Teffera 2012, 6)

On the one hand, in spite of their overall privileged status as well as their political inexperience, the revos might have been convinced that Teffera's group had the potential for redemption and emancipation; otherwise, they would have continued judging them as the bourgeois, hence unfit for candidacy in the movement. On the other hand, as flexible and progressive as they appeared to be, Teffera and her friends were yet to go a long way before they could adapt to their new circumstances as members of the underground circle. For example, having lived an easy life, it was not initially easy for Teffera to commit herself to the extensive readings and reflections on Marxism for the weekly studies. Nor was it natural for her to identify with the economic predicament of the majority poor so as to fight against it. Yet, despite all that hindered her entry, she soon became a member. It is the convergence of romance and politics that distinguishes Teffera's journey as a student activist. She writes:

I was in awe of him for expanding the realm of my consciousness and for quenching my thirst for knowledge. I was enchanted by his mysteriousness and fascinated by his brilliance. He was of a different breed and I knew I could fall for that very easily … he had definitely aroused interest in me in something I had not yet defined. I felt something stirring in my soul. (2012, 37)

Little did she know, at that juncture, however, that she was signing up for a lifetime commitment not just to the underground movement but also to Getachew. As she said, in the years that followed, the love she had for him grew and meshed with the love she had for the party (by this time, the underground movement has grown into a full-fledged party, the EPRP). Consequently, for her, Getachew and the party had become inseparable and her commitment to the party became a commitment to Getachew and the adoration she had for him.

Teffera's initial reluctance to fully engage in her responsibilities eventually gave way to unstinting devotion. Her transformation is attributed in her memoir to the intimacy and affection she soon developed for Getachew. It was, she writes, through his meticulous observation and deep theoretical knowledge, intimidating as they were to her initially, that she removed the veil of political ignorance that had long clouded her views of the world. Consequently, in her attempt to measure up to his expectations, she began to see things differently and grew to be more analytical in her political views, lest she would lose his affection. For instance, we witness her sudden realisation of the seriousness of her role when she narrates how protests erupted on campus in 1973. She says:

It was the first time I had been beaten up. Compared with this, the demonstration in Harar was a picnic in the park … . I indeed survived "those heavy boots" … More importantly, April 20 became a landmark in terms of my understanding of social and political action. (2012, 46–47)

Another turning point, a hallmark of Teffera's political maturity, is emphasised through her unexpected encounter with Getachew on campus after she became his disciple. The day Getachew found her wearing the "shockingly short" skirt she borrowed from her four-year-old niece (2012, 55), she felt too mortified to stand next to him. She instantly realised

how unbecoming and embarrassing her lingering fashion obsessions were now that she was charged with a serious mission. The level of shame and regret she suffered when she was "caught" in that miniskirt is presented in the text as an affirmation of her political maturity and transformation. This incident also juxtaposes the current politically mature Teffera with her earlier self as the "jolly-jack", marking the end of her political innocence. Teffera does not present it this way, but one can also take a more critical position and develop a critique of how patriarchal norms often determine what is "revolutionary". This more critical reading of the role of male revolutionaries as creators of the norms remains largely under the surface of the text, and I return to it in the final paragraphs of the article.

Certainly, the political maturity she at last reached is presented to the reader as being the result of her extensive reading and continuous engagement in the study circle under Getachew's mentorship. At this stage of her journey, the university campus was no longer a place of youthful trivialities that it once was for her. Rather, it was now a crucial political space, which brought her closer to the ideal world of socialism. She referred to this period of her political epiphany as "glorious" for being able to get hold of works by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Frantz Fanon, Fidel Castro and others, which were widely read and analysed, and so contributed to her theoretical maturity. Devouring these books, Teffera writes, she became fearless, taking part in clandestine meetings on campus, in staging protests and boycotting classes and in turning the university into a political and ideological battlefield.

The small house at Afincho ber also played a noteworthy role in the movement, particularly in terms of sheltering the students from the university administration, which by then was unyielding in taking measures against those found with prohibited books such as books on Marxism. Students smuggled the books they obtained from their fellow students who were studying in European as well as North American universities. They covered them in the most inconspicuous ways to protect themselves from the administration's scrutiny while bringing them to campus. However, with the administration's eventual tightening of its control, free theoretical engagement became possible only through the physical space that the mud house *at* Afincho ber provided.

The Party or Death: Political Zealotry

Over just a period of one year since meeting Getachew, Teffera describes the transformation in her political views, which she ascribed to Getachew's formative influence. However, by 1974, she was not merely politically conscious, but her political views had become so radical that she was even ready to trade her life for the party and anything related to it. This ardent devotion to radical ideals and a radical life does not fit so neatly into the romance plot, and the description of Getachew as the leader and teacher. Teffera's affiliation to the party changed her in many significant ways, and the reader sees her growing readiness to sacrifice everything else in favour of her political struggle. Her family, her education and the friends she grew up with became the first to be shunned in favour of the party. For instance, she did not hesitate to walk out on her sister when it was decided that she was to remain home for her safety. She did not have to think twice when she packed her bag and left at once and presents this departure as one of bravely fighting off the sorrow of parting with

her loved ones. It was not even an option for Teffera at this point of her life to put family before the party as she was bestowed with responsibilities that were decisive for the party's survival.

> All the sentiment I had for family and friends was channelled into this new breed of humanity. What bound us with family members was blood, with friends it was love. What bound us with comrades was ideology, the revolution, the party and the future. It means they came second. The party came first and comrades embodied the party and what it stood for. They were the newly family and friends were in fact more than family and friends. The sense of camaraderie, selflessness, devotion and trust we had toward one another was unparalleled. (2012, 161)

In making this decision, she describes how she was very clear about the kind of life that was awaiting her – that she had to give up the comforts of proper shelter, food and safety. Proof of her loyalty was that she was willing, even eager, to abandon a well-to-do home and to choose a destitute life. In her narration of this choice, we do not see her hesitating when she becomes desperate and has nowhere to hide from being arrested and taken into captivity. She spent her solitary days roaming the city on foot, and at night she would go to the flat her friends rented at Piazza (a neighbourhood at the centre of Addis Ababa) until it was no longer safe for them to shelter her. She even had to spend a night in a ramshackle mud house rented out for a single night in the Merkato district (the oldest market in Addis Ababa), and spent a day hiding in the premises of a hospital that treated tuberculosis patients. Teffera had herself been taking traditional medication for tuberculosis when she joined the university and while working for the underground movement. However, it is yet another aspect of her life that she readily traded for the Party as she could not find the time to continue her treatments despite knowing it was better for her body. In the narrative, we read how she had no time to care for herself, and later on in her account we learn of the return of her ailment in full force. Even then, her health did not seem to be a priority for her as she continued her political engagement, ignoring the messages her body was sending her. The narrative describes her growing politicisation as if it alienates her from her body:

> I started feeling malaise and getting frequent headaches. I was taking a shower one morning when I found a lump on the back left side of my neck. It was as if it had burgeoned in one day. I had forgotten about my health problems. I had stopped taking medication since I have left home. I waited to see if the swelling would go down. It actually became bigger. The idea of being sick again terrified me. Not because I was afraid I might die, but because I would be unable to continue my Party activities. (2012, 263–264)

The most difficult aspect of Teffera's journey through radicalism is her decision to follow the Party path despite the growing tension within the party which particularly alienated Getachew. In the narrative, written many years after the events, Teffera as a mature woman and politician has to account for this division between the romance with the revos and the romance with the party; she also takes account of the romance with Getachew, and relativises his importance in her story of becoming. In the early period, she repeatedly affirms in the narrative, she could not tell the party apart from Getachew. Yet rather shockingly we read how the mature narrator looks back to that time to reinterpret the events and allegiances. When it was time for her to make a choice between the man and the struggle, we read, she made the choice with bitter resolution. The internal division that

threatened the Party's disintegration led to the side-lining of her lover Getachew and she chose the party above him. Thinking back to that decision, she asks questions of the moment but clearly also of herself:

> I wanted to know about his last moments. How did he feel when he was shot? What did he say? Did he say anything at all? Did he think about me? What were his last thoughts? What a cruel world it is? Could it have been bearable if the Derg[2] had killed him? What did he die for? For trying to save lives? Is all this in the name of the revolution … in the name of the people? Are we justified to do away with people's lives in the name of the revolution? How can we do good if we kill one of our own? We started out with a sense of comradeship, love and trust but where are we going? Have we forgotten where we are going? What about our collective mission?

The world suddenly turned opaque.

> I could not fathom how anybody could pull the trigger on a person like Getachew, who was so peaceful and so gentle. He had never lost his trust in the Party nor in his comrades. Can I remain in the Party after all this? How can I continue to work for the Party alongside the people who had killed him? Is it going to be the same again? (2012, 269–270)

In the face of such a political dilemma and in spite of her earlier absolute devotion to Getachew, Teffera decided to continue her involvement in the Party, and in her narrative, she has to account for this decision. In the way she presents it, she attempts to prove that her decision to remain in the party came after the realisation of her lack of an alternative and was a choice made out of desperation (2012, 286). The narration of the events forces her to find a justification for her actions, and what she chooses to foreground is her own willingness to die for the good of the Party. The voice in which these events are interpreted and reinterpreted shows us also the maturation of a woman politician, and the challenges of balancing her roles. She justifies her position by writing that all supporters of the Party were as good as dead already:

> As far as we were concerned, the fear of death had long been vanquished. Our love and commitment to the Party had washed away the stain of fear. There was no terror of the unknown: death caused us neither angst nor fear of annihilation. Death was not a lonely journey: we were interred together in mass graves, comrades-in-arms in death as in life. Death did not concern us. The struggle, the Party was all. (2012, 264)

As an older woman and as a politician looking back on these events of her life, she repeatedly states how she had had no choice. Thus, remaining in the party becomes proof, if the reader still requires it, of her devotion to the cause; and somewhat unbelievably she suggests she also stayed to honour Getachew's memory.

Conclusion

Campus life, which initially promised Teffera greater freedom and a life of light-hearted merrymaking, turned out to be a serious pursuit which ended in the development of a zealous political consciousness. At a personal level, Teffera's engagement in the student movement brought her out of the physical and mental limitations of her privileged background, making her a fierce revolutionary. The unflinching belief she had in the party and her commitment to the realisation of its goals are presented to the reader as a test of human endurance, and hence she also recuperates the timid girl she was, one who was anxious not to offend the patriarchal sensibilities of her lover.

A close examination of the memoir reveals two important points concerning political movements in general. First, it challenges the sometimes held view that a political struggle is a predisposition exclusive to the underprivileged. It demonstrates that, with the right political context such as the one provided by Haile Selassie I University, privileged citizens can also be agents of change – even if this means turning their backs on personal and familial obligations and ties of love. This clearly has implications for how women politicians represent the weight of the romance plot in their lives. Secondly, although political movements sometimes encourage life in which romantic relationships are shunned as distractions if not futile, the memoir shows the many (ambiguous) possibilities romantic commitments could provide for political engagement. In Teffera's case, the romance plot was the single most powerful reason motivating her to join the struggle in the first place and to remain loyal until the end. Perhaps, if it were not for the love she had for Getachew, she would have dropped out of the study club right from the outset as two of her friends did. Overall, Teffera's lifelong commitment to Getachew, which was commensurate with her devotion to the Party, tells of the possible entwinement of the personal and the political; but it also makes evident that women (like men) will sometimes make choices that privilege their social rather than familial roles.

Tower in the Sky is not simply a recollection of an individual woman's political journey but can also be read as an important archive on the decisions made by women politicians, a topic which conventional historiography often neglects. While reflecting the possible nuances of history, *Tower in the Sky* gives voice to the women whose impactful political contributions have largely been omitted from the overarching ESM narrative.

Notes

1. It should be mentioned here that USUAA'S Struggle, ESUNA's Combat and WWFES's Forward played a tremendous role in forging solidarity between Ethiopian students inside the country and those abroad, as well as defining the direction for the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle. These publications went a long way in raising the level of consciousness among secondary school students and in broadening the scope of the struggle to include anti-apartheid and anti-Zionist stances (Amanuel in Zewde 2010, 131).
2. The military regime which took power in 1974 following the revolution and Emperor Haile Selassie's dethronement.

Acknowledgements

Open Access funding provided by the Qatar National Library.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Adamu, Abebaw Yirga, and Randi Rønning Balsvik. 2017. *Students' Participation in and Contribution to Political and Social Change in Ethiopia. What Politics?* Leiden: Brill.

Addis Ababa University. 2001. የኮሌጅ ቀን ግጥሞች *(College Day Poems)*. Addis Ababa: Bole Printing Press.

Ayalew, Semeneh. 2021. “The Young and the Urban in Addis Ababa: Towards a Popular History of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, c. the 1950s–1974.” Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.

Balsvik, Randi Rønning. 1985. *Haile Selassie’s Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952–1977*. Michigan: African Studies Center, Michigan State University.

Haile Michael, Tadelech. 2020. *ዳኛው ማነው? (Who is the Judge?)*. Addis Ababa: Eclipse Printing Press.

McCann, James. 2013. “*Tower in the Sky* by Hiwot Teffera.” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46 (1): 176–177.

Mengiste, Maaza. 2010. *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Smith, Sidione, and Julia Watson. 2001. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Teffera, Hiwot. 2012. *Tower in the Sky*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.

Zewde, Bahru. 2001. *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855–1991*. Ohio: James Currey.

Zewde, Bahru, ed. 2010. *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History*. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.

Zewde, Bahru. 2014. *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement 1960–1974*. New York: James Currey.