

## **BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY**

**Fasil Yitbarek, *The Texture of Dreams*, Chicago IL: Nyala Publishing  
Chicago, 2005. [pp310] [US \$19.95]**

**By Tecola W. Hagos**

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### **I. Introduction**

It is rare that people are fortunate enough to witness the emergence of a great writer, painter, or musician. I consider myself very privileged to have read the very first book of a young Ethiopian author living in the United States, in whose future I see monumental achievements given time and a benign life. Fasil Yitbarek has presented us with a great gift this year—his first *bona fide* novel titled *The Texture of Dreams* [Nyal Publishing, 2005]. It has been some time since I read an exiting first novel by anybody from the time I read a thoroughly enjoyable work, *The Bean Trees* [HaperCollins, 1988], by Barbara Kingsolver some years ago, an unknown female author then. But then, Kingsolver had ample warming-up period, writing countless articles and summaries for mainstream publications before she ventured out with a highly readable first novel. By contrast, Fasil Yitbarek seems to have started his hundred-yard dash from a standing position.

I love reading long and meandering novels even those that are untidy, sprawling, and hopelessly disorganized—I mean reading really long novels such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Balzac's *The Human Comedy* (*Pere Goriot* and others), Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, et cetera with complex characters, all focused on human aspirations, achievements, and failures, and all superbly written masterpieces. There are several great novels written in Amharic too, such as *Araya*, *Fiker Eskemeq'ber* et cetera, which I have in mind while writing this review. There is a common theme in almost all the books mentioned above that of “outsiders” struggling to become part of societies' most desirable associations or trying to be accepted by the “insiders” with power and social influences.

In a way, *The Texture of Dreams*, the book I am reviewing here, has the same generic (universal) theme that one finds in the many outstanding books mentioned above, but it is also impregnated with our own (Ethiopian/immigrant) peculiar contemporary problems. It shares the romantic (Stendhal) style of earlier era and the realism (Balzac), and to some extent, the modernist naturalistic (Dreiser) styles of the Nineteenth Century of such great books cited above. However, I am not making any analogous conclusion between *The Texture of Dreams* and the books mentioned above on questions or matters dealing with length or organization; Fasil Yitbarek's book is quite compact, well organized, and engaging work.

### **II. Fasil and His New Book**

Writing a book requires great passion, skill, endurance, and faith. It is not a task that one can indulge at a whim. Having written several books and essays, I know first hand that writing is a lonely endeavor like running a great Marathon. One must have great passion for the written word in order to sit and write hour after hour, month after month, and even year after year. One must also have great faith that there would be a finished product sometime in the future. It is not a glamorous task, with no one to encourage and applaud from the sideline or at the finishing point. The fact is that writing of any kind is a very lonely, time consuming, and demanding task.

Now, let me start from the beginning, from the title of the book by Fasil [I will use his first name in conformity to Ethiopian form of addressing individuals not as a sign of disrespect but as a sign of closeness and admiration]. Fasil gave his first novel a title with much nuance and tremendously invocative imagery. The phrase “the texture of dreams” is near perfect poetic expression for a title

of a novel, which more or less envelops the non-material content as the paper binding does of the physical tome. Of course, titles are meant to catch our attention. How else can we get to a book at the briefest of moments while glancing at bookshelves or sampling books on display tables? Although I applaud the choice of expression by Fasil for the title of his book, the design of the book cover does not do justice to such a marvelous title. The prints are too small for the title and the color scheme too subdued. Maybe a far superior sense of aesthetics could be the case compared to my more passionate sense of design and color.

The book seems to have an element of autobiography, as is the case with all good novelists' first narrative works. It is both technically wise and cognitively plausible to base a story line and keep it moving chapter after chapter, page after page having oneself as a companion running along the entire course. Fasil has structured and developed his narrative in highly engaging manner. Usually most current authors indulge in using several threads of story lines where the characters in confusing manner are weaved in and out of such narrative threads. Fasil used far simpler and easier to follow narrative structure compared to other contemporary writers. I do not think it has to do with lack of sophistication or experience, but a different approach of story telling, Fasil's being in the great tradition of native oral storytellers where clarity in a single thread is of paramount importance to hold the listeners attention.

### **III. Fasil as Craftsman**

I suppose that Fasil developed his main theme from a composite of uprooted individuals' personal experiences in a strange and often hostile place of new residence or place of refuge. The main theme of the book is simple and almost innocent. There are no ghosts or mummies popping out from crypts and potholes. Reading the book gives you a sensation of a pleasant morning walk around a country side full of sunshine, even though the story unfolds in urban areas such as Queens, Manhattan et cetera. No one can ever get more urban than that. The characters in Fasil's narration are quite familiar to most of us uprooted human beings. The story line starts with a young boy from a poor family in a provincial town in Ethiopia and culminates in a far off dream country. The boy first has to go through a local high school and then graduate from Addis Ababa University. After graduation and a couple of years stint in some government job, he finally finds his way to the United States and lives happily ever after. There you have it, the whole three hundred pages of it. But, to reduce such a richly textured novel into such skeletal thematic rendition will be a gross injustice.

*The Texture of Dreams* is a book worth reading not only for its moral and ethical content but also for the richness of its language, for its humor, and for its address of the human condition in the struggle of a young man in a strange and often hostile society. Fasil has the insight of a much older person in seeing humor in some of our pathetic effort to be respectable or dignified in a rude modern world. Nevertheless, Fasil's humor is not the type of humor that sneers and hiss at us, but the one that lightens our existential burden. Even his occasional cynicism has a tinge of human compassion. No question the book is well written even if there are few cliché phrases and some overused expressions. Despite such very few disconcerting flaws, one cannot help but see a great writer in the making. No question that Fasil has the gift of a great storyteller, and it is only a matter of time his skill will be fully realized.

Yosef Temesgen is the main narrator and character of the book. Fasil did develop quite well Yosef Temesgen's character even though he completely failed to place him in a real place in Dessie or later in Addis Ababa. The story is supposed to start in Dessie, in a town I was born and grew up. Fasil did not give us a sense of Dessie as a place through description of landmarks and familiar popular spots. Dessie is a lot more than just "dusty roads" and a couple of churches. It is a wonderfully complex provincial town with a rich history and home of some of the most fascinating historical figures in Ethiopian history such as King Michael, Lij Eyassu, Woizero Mentwab, Ras Wolei. Deiazmach Above et cetera from its past. I very much wish that Fasil had spent some of his

invocative statements to that aspect of the town that would have helped us understand the pride and aspiration of his main character Yosef Temesgen. What Fasil did was create a space, but failed to fill it up in order to make it “a place” where people live, grow, love, or die. The same could be said also about Fasil’s cursory Addis Ababa.

The official line of the “American Dream” dictates that hard work and rational action would lead anyone to succeed greatly in the United States. Of course, that is one of the greatest lies told people in the hope of giving them the right motive to work rather than get busy killing each other in their newly adopted home. The truth of the matter is that people, immigrant or not, who succeeded here in the United States would have succeeded elsewhere any ways. The “American Dream” is just one of those harmless lies that keep up the spirit of expectation for new immigrants coming to the United States. It would have been heartless for anyone to tell such starry-eyed new comers, some of whom barely surviving by their skins from the torture chambers and prison camps back in their native nations under brutal leaders, how tough and dehumanizing life in the United States can be.

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#### **IV. Fasil as Innovator and Social Critique**

I suggest that people read this novel by Fasil carefully. There are remnants of layers of American racist culture still at work that need be exposed and evaluated for what they are. Our teachers and parents to a limited extent during our schooling, even in high schools and at the University levels, until the 1970s failed us by not exposing the truth to us about the racism and the dehumanizing Jim Crow society of the United States. Whether it was at school or at home, no one told us the brutal history of slavery in the United States, or how folks of African decent were lynched, dehumanized, and discriminated against during the period we were growing up in blissful ignorance in the 1950s and 1960s. We knew nothing growing up in Ethiopia how brutally and savagely the United States government dealt with native people (Indians) in its history. The irony of it all was that we cheered innocently on the side of the cowboys in their fights against native people (Indians) while watching cowboy movies in movie houses left behind by the Italians in their five years occupation of Ethiopia. Our ignorance of the human degradation in the United States was unbelievably complete and shameful. Even the arrival of Peace Corps volunteers, who were mostly idealistic young men and women, in the early 1960s in Ethiopia did not educate us much about the United States social, cultural, and political background. I am not beating upon the United States, for it has made tremendous strides since then toward its ideal state, but sadly, in the process it has created new social and political problems in the rest of the world as well.

In fact, our Ethiopian social structure was very polarized and the people very jaded due to Haile Selassie’s obsession to modernize Ethiopia, and the nation as a whole was in some form of mass hypnosis. We were oblivious of the deep harm being inflicted upon us by the types of cosmetic changes that took place (and still taking place) profoundly affecting our pride and ethical standards. The hyphenation of the population was extremely disconcerting such that in one of the schools in Dessie (I believe, Negus Michael) there was a certain teacher who used to wear full cowboy gear with boots and toy guns on his hips to school and around town. And, gleeful school kids followed him around with great admiration. I was in middle school when we started to know of the outside world, and we started trying to imitate that utterly despicable teacher and the cowboy movie stars we watched on screen, with our homemade straw hats and winter rubber boots. If we had been instructed properly, it would have saved us a lot of pain from dreaming of the United States as our ultimate destination later in our lives. Such timely knowledge of the reality abroad, whether it is in the United States or Europe, during our formative years would have helped us build our character not to have any illusions about the outside world. The only bad people we were taught about were the Italians who attempted twice to subjugate us.

No doubt, a young artist has much to learn, but learning has two stages of short-term intense experience/learning and also that of a life long process. I am conflicted often deciding whether a life lived longer would open greater possibilities or dulls ones sensitivity and clogs ones receptacles. There is much to be said for “fresh life” like a newly minted shiny penny not yet tarnished or worn out by existential drudgery. I am not extolling inexperience or stupidity, but simply pointing out the fact that with a certain degree of intelligence and eagerness to learn even a very young person is capable of producing works of art of great depth and richness. Thus, I believe that every young artist must not think of his work as a work in progress even as he toils along finding his way, but as a life being lived to its maximum.

Fasil has brought to life, to varying degrees of vitality, some memorable characters other than the main character Yosef Temesgen, whom we feel we have met at some point in our lives while living as strangers in new places. Would it have mattered that the incidents and events in the book mainly took place over ten thousand miles from our homeland? I think not. The Ethiopian friends of Yosef are shadows in the narration; I wish Fasil had given them more substance. For example, I am left wondering what exactly was Yosef’s relationship to the two Ethiopian young women who came to receive him at the Kennedy Airport. I was expecting some thing more intimate to develop between Yosef and one of the young women. It did not. It would have been interesting for Fasil to explore why such normal affinity in between new immigrants did not develop in the case of the Ethiopian immigrants in his novel. By contrast, the case with other immigrant groups, except maybe the Chinese and other East Asian new arrivals, may give us some light to this interesting phenomenon that Fasil chose not to explore.

Thank God that we are spared from overt sexual scenes being described to us by Fasil. It is gratifying to see that Fasil has still maintained his Ethiopian modesty when it comes to talking or writing about sexual relationships. I was relieved that his narration of intimacy is quite brief and left more to the imagination of the reader than being splashed on print paper. Maybe after a few more novels, I might expect him to be more adventurous in his writing involving sex and relationships. The story in his first novel is so engrossing that such items were not necessary in order to shore up his novel. I neither miss nor sought for such explicit narrative dealing with sex in this particular novel.

One other exquisitely developed character is the elderly landlady, Mrs. Beverly Hanson. She is introduced to us quite early in the story in Chapter 8 and remains with us all the way to the end of the book, over thirty Chapters later. Along the way she gave us memorable times both happy and sad. Fasil, as a moralist and social commentator, is doing his social critique through the relationship of his main characters Yosef, the “alien,” and Mrs. Hanson, the quintessential American elderly woman. In a way, through Yosef we too are having an intimate dialogue with America itself. Not only that but also we are meeting (seizing-up) ourselves for the first time in the person of Yosef as immigrants, a new experience most of us in the Diaspora.

#### **V. Fasil as Weaver of Hope and Builder of Bridges - Conclusion**

The main character Yosef Temesgen is the type of person I would have liked to know and befriend, for he has so many admirable qualities including a healthy self-love. I applauded when Yosef decided to teach and not be part of the teachers’ strike going right through the picket lines of the demonstrators at the school he was teaching. I would have joined the strikers not because I wholeheartedly supported them, but because I would have been intimidated and would have wanted to “confirm.” Peer pressure would have been also another factor that would have forced me to join the strikers, as I have done many times over demonstrating against Haile Selassie’s Government in my student days. I still have problem distinguishing between legitimate self-love and unacceptable narcissism and greed. Fasil in the character of Yosef resolved that issue for us very wisely—a resolution that is far beyond Fasil’s numerical age.

I am bringing up this issue of a healthy self-love here because it is a very important key to understanding why Ethiopians remained under stagnant political and economic oppressive systems for hundreds of years. I believe that Ethiopians in general and more so highlanders have very much underdeveloped or corrupted sense of self-love. It might have to do with the relentless discipline from both the religious fathers as well as from biological fathers of every child in every family required of a society constantly under siege of possibility of attack from the surrounding marauders and Arab and European colonialists. Probably Professor Donald Levine, whom I admire and respect greatly and even more so especially after reading about his recent Chicago interview, would disagree with me on this point because his thesis in his famous book *Wax and Gold* speaks of well-developed sense of individuality at least in the Amhara people of Menz where he conducted most of his research. I think he had misread the "individuality" he observed and admired in his research, and as result has given it an exaggerated importance in Ethiopian culture. Ethiopians have gone through an extended traumatic social condition since the Sixteenth Century and as a result our individuality and our connection to society is a confused one. I am not beating on us, but rather hoping to help us understand the forces that shaped our sense of morality and communal responsibilities, with the hope of helping us solve our political, social, and economic problems.

Levine or others seem to be writing without making a distinction between the two aspects of "individualism" as described herein. It seems to me that "individualism" has two distinct phases: on one side, we have the narcissistic destructive type limited in scope literally by the skin of the individual, and on the other hand, we have the healthy "individual self-love" that is the foundation for the formation of all healthy nuclear families. The later aspect of individualism extends the privileges and rights craved by an individual to the immediate family members of such a person. For example, a father with such healthy self-love will not impose tyrannical rule on his wife or their children, and the other members of such a nuclear family are also considerate of each other's needs and interests and thereby have respectful and devoted relationship with each other. They all push to maximize the success of each member of the family and not just feed into the hierarchy.

I believe that writers (historians, sociologists, jurists et cetera) who speak of communal and extended family relationships as positive aspect of social organization in Africa and elsewhere have misread or confused such relationships with the highly evolved communitarians. Conformity to the norms and demands of a group or to the hierarchy is not communalism in its positive sense, but a perverted and deformed individualism. It is not at the higher end of moral development, but at its most primitive base. If we use as our measurement of moral growth Kohlberg's three level (and divided up into six stages or phases) of moral development, the type of moral development of the individual in a tribal or extended family system is to be found at the first level (stage one and two) of fearfulness and underdeveloped sense of right and wrong or justice. A true communitarian personality would have a well-developed sense of justice, fairness, and courage to defy the norms and expectations of a group if such norms and demands violate that individual's highly evolved morality of sense of justice and fairness. At such elevated state, the interest of the community as a whole is best served in a far more profound manner. Such individual would measure in level two (stage four) or level three (stage five) on Kohlberg's scale of moral development. Conformity is a deformed and excessive individualism.

It is in this sense that I appreciate Fasil's treatment of the dilemma that Yosef was faced with as teacher and as new immigrant. Fasil through Yosef resolved the dilemma effectively by choosing the path of a healthy self-love and by not conforming to the demands of others with no less selfish acts of irrationality and deformation. In that single narrative by Fasil of Yosef breaking through the strike-line, walking in to his class to teach, and facing his immigrant students, most of whom were from the old Soviet Union, we participate in the intensity of the drama and that of our own existential trial. For ones, I am happy to know of an individual, even if a character in a work of fiction, acting responsibly and courageously against mob psychology and jingoistic social concern.

Fasil as a new vouna immiarant has to asses properly his role in the United States. and to a lesser

extent justify his presence at such a safe place when most of our countrymen (women) are at sever and immediate danger of disintegration into a cauldron of civil war. He approached that issue to some extent in the development of Yosef's character in as far as Yosef is settling down in the United States growing his roots into its social fabric. With that settling down in the United States in mind, I would have liked to read some suggestion of some nascent involvement of Yosef in the acquisition of real wealth in the United States. Yosef is still at the stage of "a jaded new American consumer" when we left him at the end of the book. We all must understand that wealth is the source of political power in the United States or else where in most of the world, and the source of that wealth is real estate. Caucasian Americans have been effectively controlling the acquisition of property since the colonial period to date. They use now a self-serving credit-worthiness scheme of lending almost one hundred percent exclusively to their own kind, and bar most non-Caucasians, especially people of African decent, from participating in the fiction of the "American Dream" of acquisition of property. Of course, there are a couple of minority groups in the American society, with distinct advantages of affinity with the majority, who have breached such artificial barriers. However, such groups cannot be used as models for effective change to level the field for everyone.

There are certain things that need be said here and now. Despite all that heart wrenching injustice and cruelty in its history, the United States is still the one place on Earth that is constantly adjusting, and reexamining its social, political and economic as well as its jurisprudence all the time. The United States (not Africa, Europe, Asia, or Latin America) one can claim with justification is the one place on Earth where Black people have gained some respectability that can be measured and appreciated worldwide. I am also aware of the atrocities committed by Europeans and others on their own people in the past, maybe even worse than that in Africa, but they have much to show now in their political and economic development. Africa in general is the worst place for black Africans. Africa has degraded, persecuted, and dehumanized most of its own indigenous African population, with nothing to show for all that suffering. And this human tragedy includes Ethiopia. We do not have to strain ourselves looking for evidence to justify my statement, for the history of the Continent of the last sixty years is evidence enough. I am very much aware of the fact of the "Caucasian hand" working behind the many brutal African leaders who had committed atrocities and looted billions of dollars or equivalent in Africa. However, that is not a good excuse, and it is precisely my point that illustrates our failure as people and civilization so far.

In conclusion, I must emphasize the fact that Fasil is a bridge builder of understanding and appreciation between two distinct cultures. In the process of developing the intricate interaction between the two main characters, Yosef and Mrs. Hanson, Fasil has successfully humanized America, the frightful Gargantuan figure that devours its own children/people and grow ever fatter and more powerful. In addition, Fasil properly trimmed down the United States to its human size exposing its vulnerability and weaknesses, warts and all. In the activities of Yosef, we too are making our peace with our immigrant status and overcoming our feeling of being in transition and changing our touristy attitude toward the United States to that of settlers. By the end of the Book, even Queens is not a frightening location. Just like America itself, America's forbidding part has become a place and a home too—a transformation that took place in the magical hands of a promising writer. This is a book worth rereading. Bravo! Fasil, for a job well done.

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