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Full Length Research Paper

From disillusionment to protest: Poems by Haile Selassie I University students

Tesfaye Dagnew

Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia.

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This paper analyzes Amharic poems written in the 1950s and 1960s during annual College Day competitions held by students of the then Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The contemporary global and local socio-political situations are given as background to help understand the context in which the poems were written. The poems have been grouped into two categories, as poems of disillusionment and poems of protest. While disillusionment poems revealed the awareness of the university students as regards the problems that prevailed in the country, the protest poems adamantly shouted that the regime had to be up-rooted. The paper recommends that the contributions of these poems to the socio-political changes that took place in Ethiopia in 1974 have to be studied and be given their proper place.

Key words: Poems, Haile Selassie I University, students, disillusionment, protest.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a major literary genre which has been in use by man for a long period of time serving different purposes. Festivals, wars, and rituals, are among the ideal conditions that inspire men for the creation of poems. Historical and contemporary situations may also contribute to the birth of a new kind of poetry. The literary outpourings of the Negro Movement of the 1920s in America were largely a reflection of wider political programs that revolved around the ideas of race, self-reliance and nationhood (Martin, 1991). The literature of the Negro Movement named "Harlem Renaissance" was dominantly expressed by poetry. For those African-American poets, "art for its own sake" was a luxury that struggling people could not afford; art, for them, served the racial-political purpose of the movement (Martin,

1991). Similarly, poetry was the most important genre among the Negritude writers like Senghor, David Diop, Du Bois and others. Poetry for those poets was a tool through which they reflected the social and political problems of colonial Africa and expressed their personal reactions to the contemporary realities.

Poetry as a literary form has been used by many as a means to revolt against oppressive situations as shown in the two examples above. In Ethiopia, a similar situation had occurred in the 1960s when Ethiopian university students started to use poetry as a means to disseminate and propagate their ideas against the political system of the Haile Selassie regime that ruled the country from 1930 – 1974.

Ethiopia was occupied by Fascist Italy for five years

E-mail: tesfayedagnew@gmail.com

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before it got its independence in 1941. A few years following that period, Ethiopian literature is said to have been dominantly conformist, constantly praising Emperor Haile Selassie as the liberator of the country from occupation and as the opener of the door for modernization and civilization. But, a few years later, after the establishment of University College of Addis Ababa, which later became Haile Selassie I University in 1951, the poems that were written by the students started to show the socio-political situations in the country and the need for change, similar to the overall ideals of the Ethiopian student movement at that time. In order to fully comprehend the transformation from the conformist kind of literature to radical poetry, it is imperative to critically examine the global and local conditions that contributed to its creation.

Global Situations/The Cold War

The end of World War II resulted in a situation in which the two super powers, the USA and the USSR, competed to impose their ideologies on the other nations of the world. This situation created what is commonly known as the Cold War between the Western bloc and the Communist bloc, a war fought by "... propaganda, diplomacy, economic competition, and localized military action" (Gordon, 1971:415).

Hence, the dominant powers started to compete for economic and political superiority, a competition that created antagonism between the U.S.A and the Soviet Union. It became an ideological and political warfare, and a competition for economic power. Unlike the Second World War, the fight between these two camps became a war of propaganda.

The question here is how this global phenomenon was related to the then Ethiopian internal politics and how it influenced the views of the Ethiopian university students. The Haile Selassie regime had strong political and military ties with the USA. On the other hand, modern education introduced Ethiopian students to different political views that made them obsessed with radical political ideologies like Marxism, and officially opposed the regime's political alliance with the capitalist camp.

The university students believed that the prevalence of oppression of the masses of the people, the injustice that occurred in the country and the wretched life of Ethiopians was caused by the feudal regime of Haile Selassie, which received political, economic and military support from the United States of America. The students, as a result became antagonistic to the regime and to what they called American Imperialism. An incident that took place at the University Christmas Hall during an annual beauty contest is a reflection of the sentiment that the students had; they took advantage of the occasion to turn it into an expression of protest as described below by Balsvik (2007:33-34):

It can be said with certainty that the fashion show was used by a small group of students as a pretext to voice students' resentment toward the Ethiopian government. The flow of clandestine pamphlets which followed leaves no doubt about that. Yet, beneath the objections to the fashion show was a deeply-felt resistance to the massive US military support of Ethiopia. The USA was perceived as keeping reactionary regime in power and preventing necessary reform.

It was therefore evident that the university students became convinced that the global political scenario aggravated the problems that existed in the country.

Local situations

But it was the internal realities of the country that were the driving forces for the changes in views that were beginning to formulate among the university students. It is important to understand how the students started to become aware of the realities of the country and how their opposition to the regime became radicalized from time to time in the 1960s. The rapid introduction of modern education into the country was one of the influences, and its effect is elaborated by Balsvik (2007:17) as follows:

An educational system adapted to the most developed countries of the world was implanted in one of the poorest and least developed countries of Africa. It was this opening up of the world through the acquisition of knowledge that made possible the politicization of Ethiopian students. The students became conscious of Western cultural and political values and could contrast these with the social and political reality of their own country.

The other factor that had a strong awakening impact on the university students was the arrival of scholarship students from the newly independent African countries at that time. Bahru (2008:232) explains that the coming of the African students influenced the university students:

On the subjective level, various influences worked on the students to give them a sharper perception of their society and a more radical formulation of their ideas of changing it. Beginning in 1958, the advent of scholarship students from other countries in Africa had a clearly invigorating effect on Ethiopian university students: the impact was immediate and cogent.

The other factors that influenced the perceptions of the university students included the unsuccessful coup of 1960 which exploded the imperial mystique, and the initiation of the Ethiopian University Service (EUS) which brought the students into direct contact with the people

whose life they wanted to change (Bahru, 2008).

THE IMPACT OF THE POLITICAL SCENARIO ON THE LITERATURE

Student publications were among the means through which the struggles of the student movement were manifested. Papers named *Campus Star*, *UC calls* and *News and Views* provided forums for the expression of student views (Bahru, 2002). *News and Views*, a paper that was controlled by the university officials, mainly dealt with national and international issues having little seriousness and with poems praising spiritual and natural beauty. However, some poems that were critical about the situation also had the chance to creep in. As an example, the following couplet by a Kenyan scholarship student at the university named Omegi Kaleb (1958) shows how religion was used to divert the attention of the people from worldly matters:

*Finding in earthly things no consolation
Turn to that supreme power for salvation.*
(News and Views, Vol.3 No.8 1959)

It was in 1960 that a turning point was reached in university students' poetic production when poetry contests started on College Days. These contests took place every year and the three winning poems were publicly read in front of the officials and the university community (Balsvik, 2007). Bahru (2002) describes the poems and their effects:

The poems were characterized, above everything else, by political critic and social satire. In 62, the entries so offended the authorities that the poets were suspended and the members of the executive council of the student union, the University College Union (UCU), were expelled. (p: 223)

But the yearly poetry contests did not cease. All the Amharic poems analyzed in this paper were winners in the competitions on College Days.

METHOD AND ANALYSIS OF THE POEMS

The winning Amharic poems in the annual competitions that were held in the university during the 1950s and 1960s have been compiled by Addis Ababa University in 2000 in commemoration of the University's Gold Jubilee. The collection is entitled *Yekolej Ken Gitmoch* which means, *Poems of College Days*. These poems have been documented in the IES (Institute of Ethiopian Studies) before they were compiled. The major source for this study is the compiled work, but the author has also used other sources to locate poems written during that period. Repeated reading of the poems convinced the writer that the poems could be classified into two categories, as poems of disillusionment and poems of protest. The first category refers to poems which showed the awareness of the students about basic human rights at large and the conceptions that

they had about their country (Ethiopia) with regard to the social, economic and political situations. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the poems classified under disillusionment have no elements of protest in them; it is only that their major preoccupation is to reveal the problems. The second category of poems, the protest poems, expounded the urgency to change and reverse the problems that existed and even suggested the government system that had to replace the existing one. In light of the local and global situations described earlier, this author grouped the poems into two and analyzed them. The extracts of the poems used in the discussion and analysis have been literally translated into English, just to communicate the meaning.

POEMS OF DISILLUSIONMENT

One of the students' poems in which the disillusionment surpasses local issues and deals with universal themes is *Berekete-Mergem* by Hailu Gebreyohannes, popularly called Gemoraw. The title of the poem is composed of two Amharic words that give a paradoxical meaning. The first word, *Bereket* is used to indicate abundant blessing for doing something good, but the word *Mergem* refers to cursing something or someone evil. The combined meaning of the two words conveys the idea of cursing a deed that ought to be blessed. The poem in general condemns progress that man has made in philosophy, advancements achieved in attaining knowledge and the various scientific discoveries made by man. The following excerpt raises issues related to law, government and administration:

በሰብ አስባቡ ራስን ለመጥቀም
ንብረት ለማደርጃት እያጋኑ ስም
በሕግ አመካኝቶ አየተወጡ ቁም
ደግሞም ለመፈንጠዝ በማዕዘን ዓለም
ጭቆና ባርነት፣ አድልዎና አመፅ፣ እንዲሰፋፋ በጣም
እንዲሆን ከሆነ አስበው መርምረው ሥልጣንን የሰፋት
ደግሞም አስተዳደር፣ ህግም ሆነ መንግስት
እነዚያ ጅጁዎች፣ የዋሆቹ ፍጥረት
ጥሌቶ አሪስቶትል፣ ሁላቸው ሊቃውንት
ይህን ግብዝ ሃሳብ ፣ከግብ ሳያደርሱት
በሥራ ላይ ሳይውል ገና ሲወጥኑት
ይሻላቸው ነበር፣ አፎቿን ከፋፍታ፣ ብትውጣቸው መሬት።

Creating pretexts,
To accumulate wealth
To enjoy oneself across the whole world
To oppress and terrorize all
If that were the reason for philosophizing
On authority, law and the republic,
Plato, Aristotle and all philosophers,
You fools whose ideals did not materialize,
Let the earth swallow you all!

The excerpt above curses Plato, Aristotle and all other philosophers for philosophizing on issues related to law, democracy, power, governance and administration. The claim made by the poem is that suppression, slavery, nepotism and revenge have disguised themselves under the institution of law and have expanded in the name of

protecting the law. The poet wished ‘the earth had swallowed’ the philosophers before they formulated their good intentions about governance, something that has not materialized.

The poem continues to curse different inventions including their inventors, because the inventions have ultimately been used for evil purposes. For example, Marconi is cursed for inventing the radio, because it is used for spreading lies; Edison is condemned to death by lightning, for his invention of electricity, which has not been fairly distributed. Many other scientists and inventors are mentioned by name and cursed, with an intention to show the bad sides of the discoveries. Let us consider the following excerpt to see what effects the invention of the car had:

ለመሃል ሰፋሪ ለሃብታሞች ብቻ ለማበርከት ጥቅም፤
በየመንገዱ ላይ ደሃን እየገጨ፤ ሕይወትን ለማውደም፤
የባይተዋርን ነፍስ፤ ያላግባብ አጥፍቶ፤ አስፋልት
ለማጨማለቅ፤ እንደኔ ባለው ደም፤
ደግሞም፤ ለማጭለጊያ፤ አንዳንዲቷን ደማም፤
እንዲሆን ከሆነ የተግባርህ ግቡ፤ ለጭከና አቋም፤
ደንቆሮው ፋራዲይ፤ ከመኪናህ ጋራ፤ ውቂያኖስ ስጠም።

[If the car is created
Only for the middle class and the rich,
To hit and kill the poor
To fill the streets with blood
To dating beautiful girls,
If that is the purpose for producing the car
Michael Faraday
Go down into the depths of the ocean
With your car.]

Only the rich or the middle class people can own a car; and it had been the cause for the death of many poor people in the streets. Owning a car is a sign of wealth and is used as an instrument for seducing beautiful women and having unethical relationships with them. Thus, the inventor of the car, ‘the stupid’ Michael Faraday has to be thrown to the ocean.

In *Berekete-Mergem*, nature itself is blamed for creating the human race in different colors, nationalities and religions. Nature is therefore taken as the source of all problems in the world.

Education is a major area where the student poets seem to be disillusioned. The poems question the significance of the modern education that the students have received. The students hoped and expected that education would bring change in the country, particularly, in the life of the Ethiopian peasantry. However, this was not translated into reality. Yohannes Admasu’s *Eski-Teteyeku*, from which the excerpt below is taken, shows an example of such disillusionment:

ቸገረኝ ጨነቀኝ ብጠይቅ አጥብቄ፤
ምላሽ አጥፍለት ለልቤ ጥያቄ፤

ያንጀት ልቅሶ ሆኖ የዘመኑ ሳቄ፤
ዐወቅሁ ተማርሁ ስል ሁሉንም ጠንቅቄ፤
ከደመና በላይ ሐሳቤ ቢርቅ
ከተራውም ደሃ ዕውቀቱ ቢልቅ፤
በውቀቱ ሳልረዳው የሚጠብቀኝን በተስፋ ሕሊና፤
የኔ ዕውቀት የምለው ሁኖ ቀረ መና።

[I am in pain
I have no answer to my question.
My Laughter has turned into deep sadness!
My knowledge,
My education,
My high flying thoughts,
My wisdom
Is of no use to the eagerly awaiting poor man.
My learning has sunk into atrophy.]

The poet is unable to find an answer to his question of how he can help the poor. His knowledge which stretches ‘beyond the sky’ has atrophied because he has not used it to help the poor people who have been waiting with expectations. The belief that Western education would modernize the country and improve the life of the people remained a dream, thus implying disillusionment.

In fact, another poet, Yonas Admasu, reflects a negative consequence of modern education in his poem *Mihtsare Nuro* (Abbreviation of Life) as shown in the excerpt below:

የዛሬ ዘመን ልጅ ወጣቱ ፈላስፋ
አንጎሉ ቢዳብር በዕውቀቱ ቢሰፋ፤
ምንድን ፋይዳ ስራ ምንድን አተረፈ.
የአገር ልማድ ትቶ ባህሉን ነቀፈ፤
ማተቡን በጥሶ በወግ ክር ታነቀ
ምን ሠራ፤ ምን ሠራ ወጣቱ ፈላስፋ
አንጎሉ ቢዳብር ዕውቀቱ ቢሰፋ፤
መለፈፍ ብቻ ነው የዕውቀቱ ፍቸው
የጉራ ከበሮ፤ የወሬ ከበሮ በይ አስረሽ ምቸው

[The youth of the day
The philosopher of the time
Has his wisdom faired?
It made him ignore his culture
It made him forget his tradition.
What has the youth achieved?
He is more of a teller than a doer
Ever beating the drum of boast!]

The poet questions what the contribution of educated youth has been and provides the answer himself. There has been nothing gained by the ‘wise’ young people; if anything, the new generation has been made to condemn its culture and betray the masses. The youth only talks, and cannot do any useful thing.

The other theme of disillusionment reflected in the poems is related to the fate of the heroes who had fought for the freedom of the country. *Meda Yekerehew* by Melaku Tegegne is one poem which focuses on such issue. The title of the poem literally means ‘you, who are lost in the desert.’ This poem laments the death of a

soldier in the battle field, leaving his parents, his wife and his child behind, with no one to look after them. The irony is that while such a hero's family had to be taken care of by the government, the truth, however, is that the family is condemned to eternal sadness as the concluding two lines of the poem show:

አሁን ምን ዋጣቸው ስትቀርስ አንተ
ለቁም ኃዘን ሁነህ ቀረህ ተከተተ።

[What on earth has happened to them [his family]
After you failed to return?
You are the cause for an eternal grief,
It is all over!]

PROTEST POEMS

In the history of Amharic poetry, it is doubtful whether there have been written poems that openly challenged the system as those written by university students in the 1950s and 1960s. Poetry was an important instrument used by the Ethiopian student movement. USUAA (University Students Union of Addis Ababa) in particular had "... a sharper perception of the society and a more radical formulation of ... ideas of changing it" as remarked by Bahru (2008:232). In fact, "as people familiar with the Ethiopian political scene know, student publications ... had long demanded the overthrow of the political authority and supporting socio economic structures" (Hailu Fullas as cited in Tadesse and Ail,1995:118).

The topics of protest in the poems included economic problems, lack off democratic rights and the need for change in the political system. Poverty and the low standard of living of the people is one issue that is echoed by the poems. In the poem *Nuro*, which means 'life', one reads the following lines:

ጠያቂ አላገኘም ያገር ልጅ ዘመድ፣
ብሶቱን ተካፍሎ ርሐብ የሚያበርድ።
ይኸ ኑሮ ነው ወይ የኑሮ እኩሌታ፣
ዳዴ! አይል ወይ አይቆም ሁል ጊዜ አንድ ቦታ።

[No one is there to see my fellow citizen
To share his grievance and save him from hunger,
His life is not worth living
Stagnant and static]

These lines reflect that the people are hungry and that no one is standing on their side. It is a static situation where there is no movement forward - the poet calls this 'semi-living'. In the poem *Dihaw Yinageral*, which literally means 'The poor speaks' written by Tamiru Feyissa, the first person narrator says the following:

ግማሽ ጋሬ እንጅራ አጎሰጉሰና
አንድ አቦሬ ውሃ እደሽ አደርግና
ሣር እመደቤ ላይ እጎዘጉዝና

ድራቶ ደርቤ እፈነደስና
ተመስገን እላለሁ ኑሮ ተባለና

[Eating low quality Enjera¹
Gulping water in Abore²
Spreading straw on the earth
I sleep covering myself in rags
And thank God for such a life.]

The narrator is a poor man who is desperate of his very low standard of living, but ironically thanks God for that. The food, the drink and the bed on which the man sleeps all show an image of low quality of living.

In another poem *Mut Wekashih Metahu*, written by Abebe Workie, the narrator blames the poor dead person for failing to ask why he was destined to live a harsh life before he died:

በስሙኒ ሰሌን ጠቅልለው የጣሉህ
ዓይንህ በማግስቱ ጉንዳን ያፈረጠው፤
አንተ የድሃ ሬሳ ምንም ሳትይዝ ኖረህ፤
ምንም ሳትይዝ የሄድህ፤
ሸኚ ያላገኘህ፤
ሄደ ተከትሎህ፤
ከስር የሚያስፈታህ
ሳትሞት መሞትህን ሌላው እንደሚያውቀው ሌላ እንደሚያወጋው ፣
ስትኖር ኖረህል ወይ አንተም እንደሌላው ተናገር እንስማው፣
የመኖርን ትርጉም ሳያውቅ የኖርህ እንከፍ ዕውቀት ተነፍገህ፤
መጠየቅ ያቃተህ ለምን እንደሆነ መኖር የታዘዘህ
ተናገር ልስማህ፤

[You, whose body they have thrown into the hall,
Whose eyes are swarmed by ants immediately,
You, the poor man's dead body,
You had nothing in life,
You took nothing with you,
You had no funeral attendants,
Did you know you were dead before you died?
Did you really live, when you lived?
Others know you did not,
Others tell us this,
Speak, that we can hear it from you.
Speak,
Why you did not know the meaning of life?
Why you were denied the slightest of knowledge?
Why you were not allowed to question?
Speak, that I can hear you.]

The dead man owned nothing when he lived; in fact, he was not different from the dead even before he died. The implication is that the poor ought to ask and challenge the ones who condemned them to such a meaningless life.

The other areas of protest depicted by the poems were issues related to democracy and rights of the people. *Milasen Tewulign* (spare me my tongue) is a poem

¹ An Ethiopian bread made from teff and other cereals
² A kind of container made from plant fruit

written by Abebe workie. The tongue is metaphorically used as an amplifier of the thoughts and ideas of the first person narrator of the poem. The excerpt below emphasizes that the most important thing for the narrator is his tongue:

ከፀጉሬ ጀምሮ እስከ እግር ጥፍሮቼ
ሁሉንም አልፈልግ እንዲሁ ብቻ ትቼ
ሁሉንም ውስዳት ምኑም አይጠቅመኝም
ግን ምላሴን ተዋት ሰው አልገግባትም

ምንም ምንም አልሻ ሁሉንም ውስዳ
እኔን ብቻ ተዋት ለመቀለመድ

[Take every part of me,
From top of my hair to the finger nails of my feet
Excepting one thing,

Take every part away,
But spare me my tongue

I want nothing, take everything away]
But leave my tongue to express my thoughts.

The narrator states that if ever he has to exist, he has to have his tongue. They could take away any or every part of his body, but they should spare him his tongue. A person denied of his tongue is dead. The tongue in this case stands for the right to speak, to question, to get knowledge, and is a symbol of human existence. These have been denied in the society, and denying those rights is equal to denying their existence.

Eski Teteyeku, the poem cited under the topic on disillusionment, criticizes the existence of censorship in writing and makes a mockery of the country which has been said to be free for thousands of years.

But it is the political poems which take extreme position in their provocative suggestions of overthrowing the Haile Selassie regime. Mohammed Idris's poem *From Evening to Dawn* suggests that the throne has to be eliminated:

ምነው ፀሀይ ወጥቶ ምነው አየር ፈልቶ
ይህ ጠፍር አልጋዬ ደጅ ተዘርግቶ

ድልህ የመሰለው ትኋኑ ተራግፎ
ያረጀውም ጠፍር፣ ቢለወጥ ደግ ነበር
ልተኛ አልሻም ይምጣ ቋንጤ ወንበር።

ሰዎች ነቃ በሉ አንሰላው ይለወጥ ካሊሙ ይራገፍ
ዲዲቲው ይነሰነሰ ፍሊቱ ይነፋ፣
ተባዩ ሲራገፍ ለሌሊቱ ንጋት ይሰጠናል ተስፋ።
እስቲ እንሞክረው!

[I long for the sun to rise
And the air to boil,
To see my cow-hide bed
Stretched outside,

Get rid of the reddish bed bug,
Get rid of the old bed
I don't want to lie
Unless you get me a new one

Wake up people,
Let the bed sheet and the blanket be changed,
Let the insecticide be sprayed
Let us hope for the breaking of down.
Let us try it!]

It is a very long night for the poet. His old bed which is made of strings of cow hide is full of blood-sucking bugs. He wants the day light to come so as to take the old bed outside and get rid of the blood-suckers and replace the old bed strings. The poem also suggests that the bed sheets have to be changed and that insecticides be sprayed. The old bed symbolizes the age old Imperial regime that was sucking the blood of the people (Ethiopians). Thus, the poem says it is time for the people to wake up and remove the exploitative system. This poem asks how Moscow, the Communist world, crossed the darkness of Czarist Russia. It means that just like Russia got rid of the Czar and instituted Communism, Ethiopia should eliminate the Monarchy and replace it by a Communist system.

As Mesay (2007, p.8) stated, "... by the mid-1960s Haile Selassie I university had become the centre of a student movement that was rapidly gathering momentum toward extreme forms of political activism". One of the ways in which this extreme form of activism was shown was through poetry. The following extract from a poem which was published in 1968 in USUAA's official organ *Struggle* emphatically states that everything has to be put up-side down:

ሁሉም ይቀያየር ሁሉም ይቀያየጥ
የታቹ አላይ ይውጣ የላዩ ይገልበጥ
አልጋው መደብ ይሁን መደቡ ይሁን ቆጥ
ውኃ ሸቅብ ይፍሰስ ናዳ ዳገት ይውጣ
ሁሌ እታች ለሆኑት ለነሱም ቀን ይምጣ
ያለቀሰው ይሳቅ የሳቀው ይቆጣ።

[Let everything change,
Let everything mix
Let everything turn upside down,
Let those who sleep on bed come down to the floor
And those who sleep on the floor be taken to the top
Let water flow upwards
Let eroded rocks climb the mountain
Let the day break for those at the bottom
Let the time come when those who cried will laugh
and those who laughed will be angered.]

This poem calls for a complete change, a revolution; there is no middle path. Members of the society at the lower echelon must be moved up and those at the top must go to the bottom.

Conclusion

In the 1960s, Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia was experiencing severe turbulence because of the radical ideas that developed among the students. Different factors such as the introduction of modern education contributed to the awareness that the university students started to formulate about their country. Poetry became one of the ways through which the new thoughts were expressed during those formative and violent years. The poems that were read during the annual competitions on College Days were of two types: those that broke with the long held beliefs about the greatness of the Monarchy and exposed its weaknesses, and those that shouted for a change in the system. The poems were classified as poems of disillusionment and protest, respectively. As Fekade indicated in his introduction to those poems compiled under the name *Poems of College Days* (2001), the place that the poems occupy in the history of Amharic literature and their effect on the socio-political changes that took place in 1974 in Ethiopia have to be investigated.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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