

# THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF BAALU GIRMA'S ETHIOPIAN NOVEL 'OROMAY'

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1. Background of the Study

The emergence of creative writing in Ethiopia goes back to beginning of the twentieth century, following the introduction of western education, printing press, and consequently the publication of newspapers and magazines. Various sources indicate that ‘Tobiya’ is the first novel written in Ethiopia in 1908 (Taye, 1986; Yonas, 1995 cited in Anteneh, 2014). Significant developments have been documented by Amharic literature for successive years until Haile Sillassie regime. *YalibeHasab: YäbirihanenaYäs’iyyonMogäsGäbiča* and *Addis Alämp* published by HiruyWoldeselassie in 1931 and 1933, respectively were novels written in this period.

According to Anteneh (2014) it was in the second half of the 20th century that many novels were published, and following that, several novels which dealt with the war and some other related issues began to appear in the country. *Arīaya*(1949), *Agazi* (1956), *Īnidāwāt’ačQārāč*(1956), and *LījīnātTāmālisoAyīmāt’am*(1957). After the 1950s, many notable novels like *Aliwālādīm*(1963), *FiqīrĪškāmāqabīr* (1966), *YätewodīrosĪniba*(1966), *KadmasBašhagār*(1970), *Adāfrīs* (1970) and *YāhilinaDāwol*(1972) were published. Novels written after the 1974 revolution were more concerned with bitter themes reflecting the harsh political reality of the time. As Molvaer (1980: 1 in Sileshi (2007:16)) states,

*Ethiopian authors of fiction are strongly concerned with the social and cultural life of their time, and it would not do Amharic literature full justice to evaluate it only on aesthetic grounds. This literature is not purely art for art’s sake, or for entertainment; proper appreciation of the modern Ethiopian literary scene can be gained if one relates fictional writing to society.*

Among the novelists that appeared during the post-revolution period BealuGirma was notable and his novels were highly critical of the socio-political situations of the regime. Baalu published his first book (novel) *keaddmasbashger* in 1962, and in the following years *yehellenadewell* in 1966, *yekeyekokebteri* in 1972, *addisenaderasiw* in 1975, and *oromay* in 1976 were published.

Bealus novels were known to attack the harsh political system of the dergue regime and even his last novel *oromay* is believed to be the cause of his ultimate disappearance. Simon Lowe (2007: 47) in his study “*Oromay: Imagery and Meaning*” Testifies,

*Oromay is a fantastic novel which contains all the ingredients of a great story: love, death, sacrifice, corruption, deceit, betrayal, humor and action. I just hope that future readers receive as much pleasure from it as I did, although we must always remember the message and gravity of the some of the themes, especially because BealuGirma gave his life for writing Oromay.*

The present researchers believe that among other aspects of oromay, its thematic focus need to be explicitly reviewed as the novel has created significant impact on readers' view of the Ethiopian reality since it was written. Therefore, in this study attempt will be made to analyze the themes of this popular novel.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

Theme is the main idea or message of a literary work. The message may be about life, society or human nature. Theme often explores timeless and universal ideas and are almost always implied rather than stated explicitly. The themes addressed in the novel oromay touch a range of issues and they are explicitly stated. Most of the time people who talk about this book comment that the unforgettable characters and the story line capture their attention more than the theme. This may be because the themes are explicit and readers give much attention to the story and the main characters. As a result, it is important to identify and discuss the major and minor themes in order to add a wider range of perspectives for the general readers. Therefore, the researchers believe that identification of themes for this favorite novel can be an important input in the criticism of the novel.

## **1.3. Research Questions**

In order to explore the themes in the novel 'Oromay' this study addressed the following fundamental research questions.

2. What are the major and minor themes of Ethiopian novel 'oromay'?
3. How does the writer reflect the themes in the novel 'oromay'?

## **1.3. Objective of the Study**

### **1.3.1. General Objective**

The general objectives of this research is to identify and analyze the themes in 'oromay'.

### **1.3.2. Specific objectives**

The specific objectives of this study will be to:

1. Identify and interpret the major and minor themes in the novel 'oromay'.
2. Show how BealuGirma reflects the themes in the novel 'oromay'.

#### 1.4. Significance of the Study

This research will have the following significances:

1. It can serve as a guide for the analysis of theme in similar other fictions in Ethiopian literature.
2. As far as the knowledge of the student researchers are concerned, there are no previous researches on the theme analysis of the novel “oromay” in Ambo University and this analysis can fill the gap in this area.
3. It serves as data for other researchers who are interested to make a detailed study on theme of Amharic novel.

#### 1.5. Methodology and Organization

This study took excerpts and quotes as raw data applying document/textual data analysis method using the novel ‘Oromay’ as the primary source of information for the analysis and arguments. Excerpts and quotes was taken from the novel and analyzed, discussed and evidenced. The researchers also bring different sources from critics to justify arguments.

The paper has four chapters. The first chapter is an introduction of the study which comprises: background of the study, statement of the problem, objective, significance, methodology, and synopsis of the story. Chapter two provides a related literature regarding the subject of the study. Chapter three deals with analysis and discussion on the themes in the novel. The fourth and the final chapter is the conclusion of the paper.

#### 1.6. Synopsis of ‘Oromay’

The story is narrated in the third person by a journalist named Tsegaye who is also the main character in story. He is sent to Asmara, Eritrea as propaganda minister of the Red Star campaign, an effort to defeat the rising insurgency in the area by a combination of economic and military campaigns. He arrives in Asmara in the evening and goes out to tour the city and make a documentary to be aired that same day. During his tour, he notices the strain caused by the insurgency on the local population, which is suffering from lack of food and fuel. Nonetheless, he attempts to portray an image of a resilient society that stands for peace and unification. He goes to a reception where he meets Fiameta Gilay and falls in love with her. He also meets Selay Berhe, who is a double agent with Shabia, and is the chief of a cell operating in Asmara going by the code name of Oromay. He has had previous experience with Fiameta, and is not happy when she approaches Tsegaye during the reception.

## 1.7. About the Author

BaaluGirma was born on September 22, 1939, in the province of Illiubabor, Ethiopia. His father was an Indian businessman, and his mother a local woman born to a wealthy family. His parents' marriage ended when his father decided to move his family to Addis Ababa, and his mother's family refused to permit them to leave. After the separation, Baalu's father continued to provide for his son; but Baalu never managed to develop a strong relationship with his father. In college, he changed his last name to Girma, after a family who took him in as their own and gave him love and care throughout his childhood in Addis.

Aside from being very close to his maternal grandfather and having some loving memories of one particular teacher, Baalu rarely talked about his childhood in Illiubabor. After he completed traditional Ethiopian schooling as a child, Baalu moved to Addis Ababa and became a boarding student at the ZenebWorq Elementary School.

Although he was academically very bright, as a youngster, he was also known for being a bit of a troublemaker. In fact, he was known to organize a school-wide protest in order to get his wishes.

Baalu's excellent grades earned him a scholarship at General Wingate Secondary School. In 1951, he entered General Wingate, and it was there that he found his calling in journalism and creative writing. He often thanked his English teacher, Miss Marshall, for inspiring him and teaching him the technique of writing short sentences.

In 1962, Baalu earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Journalism from Addis Ababa University. As an undergraduate, Baalu mixed academic excellence with the practice of journalism. He served as a news correspondent for the Ethiopian Herald (a prominent English-language newspaper) and as Editor-in-Chief of News and Views, a well-known university newspaper. As a young editor, Baalu was often critical of the emperor's administration and his government's policies, which at times forced Baalu to interrupt his school and go into hiding.

Despite these challenges, Baalu earned a full scholarship and obtained a master's degree in Political Science and Journalism from Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

BaaluGirmaLate in 1963, Baalu returned to Ethiopia and began his career in the Ministry of Information as Editor-in-Chief of Ye'Zareyitu Ethiopia, a weekly newspaper published in the Amharic language.

In 1965, he was appointed Editor-in-Chief of Addis Reporter, a weekly magazine published in the English language. After three years of outstanding service, Baalu left the Addis Reporter and became Editor-in-Chief of the Ethiopian Herald, a daily English-language newspaper.

The early stage of his professional life did not go without incidents. Once he was suspended from his editorship role over a controversial editorial he had written in *Addis Reporter*, a weekly magazine published in the English language. Later, when returned to work, he had to accept a salary cut.

From 1970 to 1974, Baalu served as Editor-in-Chief of *Addis Zemen*, a mainstream daily newspaper published in the Amharic language. During the country-wide violence and profound political change in 1974, *Addis Zemen*, under the editorship of Baalu, remained the only unbiased and trusted source of information.

While he was the Editor-in-Chief of *Addis Zemen*, Baalu also wrote two of his most popular novels, *KadmasBasahger* (Beyond the Horizon) and *Ye'hillinaDewel* (The Bell of Conscience).

In 1974, Baalu left *Addis Zemen* and became Deputy General Manager of the Ethiopian News Agency. Within a year, he was promoted to the General Manager position and remained in that post until 1977. At the end of 1977, Baalu became the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information.

In addition to being a journalist and writer, Baalu served as guest lecturer of creative writing at Addis Ababa University.

Throughout his career, Baalu was known for his passion for his work, integrity, and willingness to defy the powerful. He was never afraid to challenge himself and others around him. Baalu was very much liked and respected by his co-workers. Many who had the privilege to work with him considered his leadership exemplary.

As Baalu's responsibilities increased, so did his frustration with the absolute dictatorship and lack of freedom of expression. With his passionate and skillful writing, Baalu continued to criticize the government and expose the widespread human rights abuses in the country. The vigorous novelist presented six acclaimed novels, four of which – *Ye'keiKokeb Teri* (Call of the Red Star), *Haddis* (titled after the main character of the book), *Derasiw* (The Writer), and *Oromay* (The End) – were written while the military junta was in power and human right abuses in the country were at their peak.

*Oromay*, like his previous novels, captured the social and political affairs of the time. Although no names were mentioned, Baalu depicted high-ranking government officials in the book and characterized them so as to make their similarities to the contemporary leaders apparent to his readers. Of course, the courage that he had shown in *Oromay* made him increasingly popular, but it also created quite a number of powerful adversaries. Baalu was abducted by the military junta security forces while trying to exercise his right to freedom of expression.

After his shocking disappearance, the military junta classified Baalu as a missing person and circulated a leaflet asking everyone to cooperate in the fake search. A week later, family members found Baalu's car outside of Addis Ababa on the way to Debre-Zeit, but no one has heard from Baalu since. He vanished into thin air, with a big dream and an unfinished manuscript.

Baalu's books are his legacy, and they remain relevant and powerful. Even long after his short life on this earth, his literary work continues to inspire many.

Along with his wife, AlmazAbera, Baalu is survived by his daughter, Meskerem, his sons, Zelalem and Kibre, and his granddaughter, Naomi-BaaluGizaw.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### 2.1.Introduction

The word theme denotes the central idea of serious fictional work such as novel, plays, poems or short stories. Theme is an author's insight or general observation about human nature or the human condition that is conveyed through characters, plot, style, and imagery.

The non-fiction works central focus or argument used to denote the term thesis is usually stated explicitly in the opening paragraphs or chapter. In contrast, theme is more often implicit, because the reader must infer it, theme is therefore more difficult to describe and more open to various interpretation. Indeed, different readers may state a story's theme in equally valid ways.

#### 2.2.Definitions of Theme

It is possible to cite a number of definitions on the theme and its significance in literature. Yet, many of these definitions differ only in their style of expression not in essence. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine, compare and contrast the various definitions available, but it tries to see what themes means by different scholars. Among them: BerhanuMathewos in *Fundamental of Literature* (2009:122) defined theme as in a work of literature, is the central and dominant idea. This idea is seldom stated explicitly rather it is conveyed through the selection and arrangements of details through the emphasis of certain events or images and through the action and reaction of the characters. MelaknehMengistu (2008:135) in his work defines theme as the following: Theme is the central idea or ideas examined by a writer in the course of a book. Sometimes, this idea is simply explored; its important details lay bare to the reader, a book's subject and its theme need to be distinguished. The subject is what the book is written about, its theme the author's ideas about that subject. Definition by C.Hugh Dolman and William Harman (1936:475-476) in their work "A handbook to literature", forward the following definition. Theme is a central idea, in non-fiction prose it may be thought as the general topic of discussion, the subject of discourse, the thesis. In poetry and drama, it is the abstract concept that is made concrete through representation in person, action and image. They continued discussion; no proper theme is simply a subject of activity. But theme and thesis imply a subject and predicate of same kind not just vice in general, but same such proportions as a vice seems more interesting than virtue but turns out to be destructive "human wishes" if a topic or a subject variety of human wishes is theme.

Harry Shaw (1973:195-196) in book entitled, "Dictionary of literary term" defined that; theme is the central and dominating idea in a literary work and the message of moral implicit in any work of art. Definition given by Beach and Marshall (1991:239) are defines as the following; theme refers to the central meaning of a story, it is basic element of fiction. Its literary meaning is constructed by readers in interaction with text. This is to say that the meaning of a story is constructed in the process of interaction between the reader's experience and the ideas that the readers extracts from the story. Definition stated by Keckson and Arthur Ganz (1975:233) in their work entitled "A literary term Dictionary" defined that: theme... is sometimes used to indicate the subject of a work, the term theme is more frequently employed to designate its central idea or thesis. A theme maybe stated directly or indirectly, when not specifically given, it may be abstracted from the work.

In fact, there are no disputes of any kind between the six definitions quoted above; they all state that theme is the central idea, the message or moral meaning stated directly or indirectly through the work of art, though these point need to be elaborated in details. A work of art, particularly or a literary work is not something chaotic created without a tangible aim. It is rather a product of high mind aimed at conveying a meaningful impression about life. A novel for instance, is a work of art shaped and molded by an author who aims to transmit a significant idea to his/her reader. Its significance is that readers find characters and events in a novel to be very important. What is written will be a matter of importance to the people because it reveals something about their interaction in life. That is why a theme in literature is said to be a central idea, the interpretation of life or the truth about human experience. Men for better or worse tend to share their experience. One watches a TV. Program or read dailies and be informed that a politician has been killed by someone and he conclude that being a political is not rewarding, one can also meet a one eyed man who happened to lose one of his eyes in a boxing bout, and infer that boxing contest is hazardous. A writer, like every one, deals with or observes these human concerns and in the same manner, he comes to conclusion about these issues. However, a writer has an urge of communicating his generalization to the rest of human being in the most convincing way as possible. One way he can fulfill this is by narrating a story in which he may shape his theme.

As already mentioned, everything in the literary literature should contribute to the central idea or the message. The central idea may either be of a specific message or of a moral meaning which can be expressed in words or a comprehensive examination which may not be detached from the work as a whole. A theme in a novel is not actually a separate stand, for it cannot be isolated from the other elements. In fact, it is an integration of the story or the center of gravity around which all the elements of the story revolve.



## 2.3. Identifications of Theme

Themes are not just extracted from the pages and announce their presence. To determine a theme it is necessary to look carefully and to consider the meaning of what the Readers have read and then people need to develop explanatory and comprehensive assertion. Their assertions are different from individual to individual, due to their difference in background and experience.

When readers study novel, they should be consider to the various ways in which authors convey themes. They convey through the following method within the same work.

Themes may be conveyed directly through the authorial voice. Although they are interested mainly in showing action, dialogue and situation, they sometimes, state ideas to guide the readers and deepen their understanding. (Jaffe and Scott, 1966:25)

A theme may be suggested indirectly through the characters speeches and actions. As Jaffe and Scott, explained in their book, *Studies in the Short Stories* (1966.13) readers should focus on the speeches and reactions of the characters to the specific situation where they stepped in. And then they should also be focused to what happens to them as a result. From this analysis of specific situation, readers may be able to extract the theme of a work.

E.Robert (1991:120) has pointed that in finding themes readers should also look for figurative language and action of characters. He also adds that authors often use figurative language and characters to express and reinforce theme.

Using different expression, author can convey the theme of cruelty, jealousy and so on. Similarly, characters are also used in order to reveal the theme of certain work. They engage in actions that are so typical that they stand out as representative of certain theme and values. (Ibid)

In general, everything in the literary selection should contribute to the central idea or the message. All events, characters and even the title of the story may shed light on the theme of the story. A theme in a novel is not actually single stand, for it cannot be isolated from other elements. Therefore, the readers need to look carefully for other elements as well.

## 2.4. Interpreting Theme

In interpreting theme, there is no formula which should be followed by every person or reader to discover the meaning of theme. Personal experience and interest will affect individuals' interpretation of the theme. According to Jaffe and Scott, "art is not a mathematics, a story will always mean something different to a reader from what it means to its writer, because the writer brings to a story one set of experience and rests where the readers brings to the same story another set of experience and interests" .(Jaffe and Scott, 1960;11)

Kirszner and Mandell (1991:245), further elaborated the idea that, the theme or the work of fiction is as much the creation of the reader as of the writer. The reader's background, knowledge and values and beliefs, all determine the theme that we perceive in a work. The readers experience, their idea about the issue discussed in the text and their assumptions about literature colors their interpretation.

Readers interest, experience, knowledge and so on are not the only factors that influence the interpretation of theme, but it requires the interaction between the reader and the text. The text provides information about the characters, plot, setting, age, appearance and other factors. But also reader's social, political; class and attitudes will contribute to his/her other interpretation of a work.

Since different readers have different experience and background they may see different themes in story. But their interpretation of a theme or theme must make sense in light of the various elements of the story. According to Kirszner and Mandell (1991:126), one has to substantiate his or her interpretation with evidences from the work, not just his or her own feelings or assumption, If the readers want their interpretation to be valid, they should support it with adequate information and examples from the text.

## 2.5. The Importance of Theme

The theme of any story might seem to be the most important and obvious element. We do catch ourselves, after having read a story, immediately asking: "what was this all about?" or, if a friend enthusiastically asks what we have read it, they expect us to say: it's a really wonderful story about ... and we will go on to say that it is about pure love that lead to heartbreaking later and soon. Yet, when we think more exactly about this, we know our curiosity is not going to be satisfied if we learn just what the subject of a story is. For example, the subject of this novel could involve pure love, difficult situation women confront and hypocrisy of self serving religious head. These themes need not to be dramatically announced at the outset, or at the conclusion, or even at all. But it is nonetheless present, giving unity to the story and reassuring the readers that he has encountered something more than a chronicle of events or a mere collection of descriptive passage. Both event and description are governed by the values of the writer and by his conception of how the world-at least his part of it-works. This does not mean, however, that the theme of a story can effortlessly be

translated into a handy or two sentence slogans. Fiction is not a work of philosophy, history or sociology. We do not expect, or want, a set of schematic ideas presented in an expository style. (Joseph Trimmer, 1967, p: 12)

If you attempt to paraphrase the meaning of any story, even one whose implications seem unmistakably clear to you, something odd will happen. The theme that has seemed so complex in context will suddenly seem utterly flat or common places. When any such theme is extracted from stories that are otherwise apparently dissimilar, the reader should not conclude that the stories essentially are the same. The characters of the stories is given primary definition by thematic considerations, other considerations we have already mentioned, such as plot, character and point of view, probably have a combined effect more powerful than that exerted by the theme alone. (Ibid, p:10)

Another way of putting this fundamental proportion about the theme of the stories is to say that theme is necessary. By theme, we mean the central and unifying idea about human experience that group out all other elements in the story. Since a good novel is likely to raise a number of related issues and pose a number of complex questions for prospective readers, we may find it difficult to decide which one is the most important theme, the statement that best integrates all our perception and insights about the story. Because, the question of theme is often the more difficult as well as one of the most important one we must consider. We may differ more as reader and writers in our consideration of these elements than of any others. These differences may be instructive, however, if they send us back of the story, it is to reexamine our thinking about its central idea. Some particular techniques may help us discover and state the theme. For example, we should look closely at the generalization either about human experiences that the author makes in the story, directly or through one of the characters. If we find no such authorial statement of the theme, we may have to ask ourselves what the central characters have learned from their experiences that they did not know at the beginning of the story. Our view of theme must finally be broad enough to include the whole story and all its implications. We may in fact discover that discussion of theme will necessarily involve a consideration of all other basic elements of the story (Ibid, p: 14)

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS

*Oromay* (an Eritrean [Tigrinya](#) word meaning 'it is pointless', borrowed from the Italian *oroma* is an [Amharic](#)-language novel, published in 1983. It was written by [Baalu Girma](#). The novel presents a cynical account on the Red Star Campaign of the [Derg](#) military junta. The book was published by the Kuraz Publishing Agency in [Addis Ababa](#). In spite of a government ban on the book, it became widely read and famous.<sup>[1]</sup> According to Ruth Iyob, the book presents 'an accurate and compelling account of the events surrounding the failure of this campaign'.

The Red Star Campaign had been declared by Colonel [Mengistu Haile Mariam](#) in a speech in [Asmara](#) on January 25, 1982. In his speech Mengistu called for the crushing of 'secessionist bandits', i.e. the [EPLF](#) guerrilla in [Eritrea](#), the [TPLF](#) in [Tigray](#) and the [EPRP](#) and [EDU](#) in [Gondar](#). The campaign was supposed to focus both on military means as well as supporting reconstruction in the affected areas. The [Commission for Organizing the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia](#) was assigned the task of leading the campaign. The government sent some 120,000 troops to participate in the campaign, making it the largest military offensive of the Derg in the Eritrean war.<sup>[4]</sup> The author Baalu Girma, had been invited by Mengistu to work as propaganda chief in the Red Terror Campaign. He had assumed the position believing in the goals of the campaign. However, he came to feel that the ideals of the campaign had been corrupted by militaristic mindsets. Once the campaign had been abruptly called off, Baalu Girma began writing *Oromay* based on the events of the campaign. Whilst the official propaganda lauded the Red Star Campaign as a success, Baalu Girma considered it a failure. He stayed behind in Eritrea during this period. *Oromay* is a love story set in Asmara in the midst of the conflict. Baalu Girma changed the names of real-life Derg officials. [Dawit Wolde Giorgis](#), then the head of COPWE in Asmara is depicted in the book as the character 'Solomon Betre-Giorgis'. Other real-life Derg officials depicted in the novel are Fisaha Geda (as Tedla Regassa, Chief of Protocol), Tesfaye Wolde-Selassie (as Betru Tesema) and Fasika Sidelel (as Mashafe Daniel).<sup>[5]</sup> These were figures that Baalu Girma knew personally. According to Dawit Woldis-Giorgis it was obvious whom the fictional characters depicted.

The Derg government is illustrated as corrupt and inefficient in the novel. However, the bulk of the book is dedicated to accounts of the war in Eritrea. In *Oromay* accounts of massacres and rapes committed by government militias in Eritrean villages are presented, as a consequence of the discourse equating all Eritreans with rebels. The book also deals with the real-world rumor that Tekle Gebre Mariam, an EPLF leader that had defected to the Derg, had been an EPLF double-agent. During this period it was extremely rare that literature presenting any form of criticism (even in mild forms) of the government could get past the official censors. According to [Kinfe Abraham](#), the only reason *Oromay* could get published was a feud between Mengistu and [Fikre Selassie](#). However, just 24 hours after its release the government banned the novel. All copies were removed from book shops. Confiscated copies of the book were turned into pulp at the Wenji sugar plant. Possession of the *Oromay* became dangerous, as owners were subjected to government harassment.<sup>[3]</sup> But some 500 copies had already been sold before the ban had been issued and the book continued to be copied through xerox machines. Baalu Girma was fired from his job. Some months later he '[disappeared](#)'. It is generally believed that his disappearance was linked to the publishing of *Oromay*.

## Plot

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The story is narrated in the third person by a journalist named Tsegaye who is also the main character in story. He is sent to Asmara, Eritrea as propaganda minister of the Red Star campaign, an effort to defeat the rising insurgency in the area by a combination of economic and military campaigns. He arrives in Asmara in the evening and goes out to tour the city and make a documentary to be aired that same day. During his tour, he notices the strain caused by the insurgency on the local population, which is suffering from lack of food and fuel. Nonetheless, he attempts to portray an image of a resilient society that stands for peace and unification. He goes to a reception where he meets Fiameta Gila and falls in love with her. He also meets Selay Berhe, who is a double agent with Shabia, and is the chief of a cell operating in Asmara going by the code name of Oromay. He has had previous experience with Fiameta, and is not happy when she approaches Tsegaye during the reception.

He came to class reeking of the brothel where he had spent the night and of the undistilled *Katikala* that still swam in his body. He was a drunk fool, my Amharic teacher, a man small in stature and in mind and prone to hurling insults at his students in the cruelest words he could conjure in the Amharic language. He was unashamed to discharge audible bodily vapors so putrid those of us condemned to his class learned to hate our own language.

But then there were those rare moments of sobriety that more than made up for the daily gaseous inferno. A lucid clear-eyed man would bounce from the door to his desk in his heavy platform shoes and bark a perky "*endiminaderachuh!*" to a room of adolescents uncertain how to deal with the malevolent moods of an alcoholic teacher. A torturous *gilmicha* (glare-filled) roll-call later, the tiny man would ceremoniously reach for a crumpled paperback from his equally crumpled jacket. He would then launch into a dramatic reading from *Oromay*, the recently published novel by BealuGirma.

He told us he read BealuGirma "for both content and form" ("*le ferenegerunal'aTaTalu.*") The year was 1983 and the teacher's occasional reading of possibly the most controversial Ethiopian novel of all time kept his students who were no more than fifteen years of age, riveted. As we sat lost in Bealu's tempestuous world of love and war, none of us knew the novel had already unleashed forces that ultimately took from Ethiopia's literary scene a writer whom ReidulfMolvaer, contemporary chronicler of Ethiopia's writers, describes as "the most consistently good writer Ethiopia has produced." (*Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants*, 1997).

I have always wanted to write about BealuGirma—my favorite Ethiopian novelist—but found writing about him extremely challenging. For starters, out his six novels (*KadmasBashager*(Beyond the Horizon), *YehilinaDewel* (The Bell of Consciousness), *YeqeyKokeb Teri* (The Call of the Red Star), *Haddis, Derasiw* (The Author), and *Oromay* ("Now, at this Moment"), I have only read three—*Kadmas*, *Haddis*, and *Oromay*. Second, the novelist's personal life and work deserve separate volumes of their own. Bealu's life and death are of Shakespearean proportions: Julius Caesar comes to mind—much like the Roman emperor's unprecedented expansion of his empire by his sheer ability to bend the will of men, the Ethiopian author reached the apogee of creativity by his ability to gain almost a cult following that allowed him survive unscathed through much of his career despite his persistently harsh criticism of the societies in which he lived. (In addition to his novels, BealuGirma served as editor for newspapers and magazines including *Menen*, *Addis Reporter*, *Addis Zemen*, *YezareyituItyopia*, and *The Ethiopian Herald* , much of this while serving as a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Information). Also, like the conqueror of Gaul, Bealu was murdered by erstwhile admirers and colleagues. And who can ever forget Almaz? Much like Calpurnia, Caesar's beautiful wife who foresaw the emperor's death, Bealu's wife, Almaz, known to be of striking beauty, had warned her husband to stay home on the day of his abduction and disappearance in February 1984.

His fascinating biography is recounted in Molvaer's *Black Lions*. BealuGirma was born in 1938 or 1939 in the province of Illubabor, Bealu's natural father was an Indian carpenter from Gujirat, India, who remained in Ethiopia after he fell in love with an Ethiopian woman, Bealu's mother. Bealu's father returned to India when Bealu was very young but a determined mother ensured that her son received an excellent education, first in Illubabor and subsequently in Addis Ababa, at Princess Zenebework Secondary School. Bealu's excellent grades earned him a scholarship at General Wingate Secondary School. He went on to graduate from Addis Ababa University and

then moved to the United States where he earned a masters degree in journalism. In the early 1960s he returned to Ethiopia and soon thereafter joined the Ethiopian Ministry of Information.

While his work as editor of some of the most respected papers and magazines earned him respect as a journalist, it was at the Ministry of Information where Bealu found a lifelong career as a civil servant. His high-ranking position at the ministry allowed him to gain powerful allies and enemies, including Ethiopia's dictator MengistuHailemariam. Throughout his career, Bealu's associations with his allies and admirers allowed him to write critically and uncensored during both the Haile Selassie and Mengistu regimes, and it was through his association with these allies that Oromay was subsequently born.

The novel that led to his untimely death in the hands of the Derg (he was only 45) has its progeny in his earlier and critically acclaimed novel, Haddis . The word Oromay, uttered by an Ethiopian of Eritrean descent in Haddis means *a questopunto*—Italian for "now at this moment." The moment in Oromay was 1982, during the planning and execution of the Red Star Campaign ( *yeqeykokebzemecha*)—the Derg's most sustained offensive in Eritrea planned jointly by Soviet and Ethiopian generals. The naming of the campaign "Red Star" was after Bealu's earlier novel of the same name. In an effort to project an image of force and finality, Mengistu had taken his entire senior military apparatus and cabinet level ministers to Asmara for several months in marathon planning and conference sessions. Bealu, who was invited to Asmara, remained in the city for three months where he was granted interviews with several high ranking Derg officials.

According to Molvaer, MengistuHailemariam granted Bealu several interviews and may have even read and approved earlier manuscripts of the novel. He must have because the book starts with a prologue by Mengistu himself in which the dictator states that the book was written in the spirit of making Ethiopia's revolution complete and the realization of a Worker's Party in Ethiopia. Mengistu signed his foreword with his standard shibboleth *Ye ItyopyaAbyot le zelalemyenur!* ("may Ethiopia's revolution live forever!")

With Mengistu's introductory praise for the book, one would expect writing that hails the life and work of the dictator. But what pours forth in next 370 pages (Kuraz Publishers, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition) led to Bealu's murder in the hands of Mengistu's security apparatus, all editors at Kuraz Publishers sacked, and the book pulled from every bookseller in the country. According to Molvaer, officials were even snatching the book from anyone seen with it. (In our class, my



teacher stopped reading from the novel, but to his credit, switched to *KadmasBashager*). In Oromay, Bealu identified members of the Derg under altered names yet whose identities were readily apparent to most readers at the time. Bealu's mockery of Mengistu whom he identifies as "the Comrade Chairman" and refers to as The Man (Sewiyew), and whose Asmara speech he reproduced with subtle parodic alterations was astounding and many are convinced Bealu made an error in judgment to believe the former dictator would tolerate the author's vituperations. The novel's protagonist's (TsegayeHailemariam) impressions when he first saw Sewiyew in the Addis Ababa-Asmara flight sets the author's sardonic tone vis-à-vis the dictator (all translations mine):

*The protocol officer loudly announced "the Comrade Chairman!" All racket, chatter, and whispering in the plane came to a sudden hush. One could have heard a needle falling. A voice of a man's man. A smile that comes from the heart and strikes like lightning. Extreme politeness that almost breaks the spirit . . . The Man! He wore a lovely military uniform. When I saw him, I was washed with feelings of strength and self-confidence. Even though men who lead nations are mere mortal beings, I am always surprised by their ability to make men respect, love, and fear them. I see them as larger than life. Perhaps it is because they have their people's consent to be their protectors or maybe because they carry on their shoulders the pride of their people. I don't know. But in any event, for these or other reasons, I tend to respect people in power. And my colleagues who have observed this in me talk about me behind my back and say, "there he goes wagging his tail when he sees a person in power." May God curse them! I'm not a person who wags his tail! Even though I don't know much about myself, I know I don't wag my tail! (Oromay, 18).*

The novel is an excellent read and its underlying story of its protagonist's love for two women ("TsegeredaMe'akel Hager" (Rose of the Central Land) and "Key Kokeb" (Red Star) set in the background of the military campaign, and his ultimate loss of both women recounted a recurrent theme in BealuGirma's novels about the recklessness of man not just in the affairs of the heart but also in his inability to rule wisely.

Bealu's disappearance in February 1984 was preceded by the abrupt withdrawal of the book from the market and its subsequent banning in Ethiopia. Bealu's liquidation in the hands of Mengistu's security agents was confirmed after the downfall of the Derg and reading about it in Mengistu's own words is downright chilling (See SeifuNegussie's interview in Chewata, January 2003).

Hands down, BealuGirma is Ethiopia's best creative writer. It is difficult to summarize Bealu's work within the parameters of this short piece but I can say that three of his novels I have read unravel intricately spun narratives without being convoluted; complex yet accessible characters that are deeply flawed but are almost never beyond redemption. And rare among Ethiopia's novelists, Bealu took great pains to create multidimensional female characters that are never two-sided or subservient to the whims of men or the situations in which a male-dominated society places them. BealuGirma's novels are unquestionable labors of love created by a man who left us enduring tomes of Ethiopic literature.

A celebration of Bealu's work and achievements is timely. Writers, whether they are journalists or creative writers, are able to put into words the hopes and aspirations of the generation in which they live. Bealu did just that. He has single-handedly inspired hundreds of Ethiopian writers to test Ethiopia's ability to tolerate dissent and its willingness to respect the freedom of expression—the foundation on which the altar of democracy is built. Like him, many have paid with their lives. BealuGirma left us six incredible novels but more important, a legacy of defiance, courage, and opposition to tyranny. I am reminded of James Baldwin's comment "*the obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only ways societies change.*"

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- A first draft of this posting (our 40th) appeared in the [first] November 2006 issue of [The Big Issue Ethiopia](#). Special thanks to Andrew Heavens of [Meskel Square](#) for inviting me to write for a promising magazine and a wonderful idea to get kids to “work and not beg.”
  - A short ETV interview with BealuGirma can be seen on youtube [here](#).
  - I am grateful to one of my favorite bloggers, Yagerlig of [Redeem Ethiopia](#), for his help on this piece (Molvaer's account was indispensable--thanks for sharing it).
  - We miss the [Wonqette](#). The internet is a vapid region without her prolific writing. Her blog inspired us to create Carpe Diem Ethiopia.



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## BaaluGirma



BaaluGirma was a journalist and author who sacrificed his life for his ethics and integrity. He is widely known in Ethiopia for his brave and skillful criticism of prominent members of Ethiopia's former socialist regime in his famous book known as *Oromai*.

The book which was circulated underground after the MengistuHailemariam regime put a ban on it, skillfully details the widespread corruption among top-government officials and generals of the army.

He gained exclusive access to the government after he was appointed as the second-in-charge of the Ministry of Information with the portfolio to personally record the “achievements” of a vigorous government campaign to weed-out separatist movements in the country.

During the course of his portfolio responsibilities, he stumbled across corruption of unforgivable magnitude and started writing the book. The book is a novel and does not mention any government officials by name. Yet it exposes the extensive wrongdoings he witnessed firsthand as an insider. Oromai illustrates what was done in the name of “working for the country”.

Shortly after a ban was put on his book, BaaluGirma was abducted from his car in a street in Addis Ababa and has never been seen since. It is assumed that he was killed shortly after his abduction. Even though he was the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Information, therefore part of the government, he made the decision to expose the corruption on the grounds that he felt more loyal to the people he was appointed to serve and loyal to his profession of journalism than the government.

Before his appointment as the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Information, he was the Editor-in-Chief of the country’s most popular mainstream newspaper *Addis Zemen*. Although *Oromay* is his masterpiece, he also wrote half-a-dozen more books on different subject matters which can be found in libraries not only in Ethiopia but also around the world. Baalu was passionate, talented and very professional as a writer and journalist.

Almost 30 years after his abduction and extrajudicial killing, Ethiopia remains a country that journalists are persecuted for saying the truth at an alarming rate. Baalu’s dream of seeing a political culture that allows freedom of speech to flourish in Ethiopia has not been realized yet, but the legacy of his professionalism and sacrifice has been inspiring generations of Ethiopians.

**The BaaluGirma Foundation**

The [Baalugirma Foundation](#) was founded in 2009 by Baalu's daughter, MeskeremBealuGirma, in the state of Michigan in the Great Lakes region of the Midwestern United States. The foundation states that it "strives to promote excellence in the creative writing and journalism professions."

The foundation provides the following biographical information about BaaluGirma.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4.1 Summary/ conclusion

On Thursday, 14 February 1984, Ethiopia lost one of its most acclaimed journalists and influential novelists. BaaluGirma left his home around 5:30 p.m. that evening - not knowing that it was to be the last time he would ever see his family. A devoted father, loved for his kindness and gentle demeanor, and widely respected for his professional work, his vanishing from the scene has left a big void in the hearts of many.

Baalugirma's disappearance came seven months after his last novel, *Oromay* (The End), was abruptly removed from bookstores and banned from the market. Shortly thereafter, Baalu was dismissed from his permanent secretary position at the Ministry of Information and was accused of jeopardizing the revolution.

*Oromay* is Baalu's masterpiece in which he playfully disguises and portrays flawed fictional characters to present a controversial view of one of Africa's protracted and harsh political realities: Mengistu H. Mariam's all out campaign to attempt to resolve the long standing conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the work, he exposes the cruelty and the recklessness of top government officials and generals.

In this captivating plot, Baalu shows the shortcomings of the government's large-scale operations and foresees its eventual downfall. *Oromay* naturally angered members of the ruling party, including the dictatorial chairman Mengistu H. Mariam. The outcome of the book, however, did not disappoint Baalu - he had decided to accept great personal risk at the outset to

tell the truth as a journalist and writer. Despite the continued surveillance of his whereabouts by the security officers, Baalu refused to go into hiding; in fact he had started working on another fiction when he was abducted by the military junta and begun reported missing.

### The early years

Baalugirma was born on September 22, 1939, in the province of Illiubabor, Ethiopia. His father was an Indian businessman, and his mother a local woman born to a wealthy family. His parents' marriage ended when his father decided to move his family to Addis Ababa, and his mother's family refused to permit them to leave. After the separation, Baalu's father continued to provide for his son; but Baalu never managed to develop a strong relationship with his father. In college, he changed his last name to Girma, after a family who took him in as their own and gave him love and care throughout his childhood in Addis.

Aside from being very close to his maternal grandfather and having some loving memories of one particular teacher, Baalu rarely talked about his childhood in Illiubabor. After he completed traditional Ethiopian schooling as a child, Baalu moved to Addis Ababa and became a boarding student at the ZenebWorq Elementary School.

Although he was academically very bright, as a youngster, he was also known for being a bit of a troublemaker. In fact, he was known to organize a school-wide protest in order to get his wishes.

Baalugirma's excellent grades earned him a scholarship at General Wingate Secondary School. In 1951, he entered General Wingate, and it was there that he found his calling in journalism and creative writing. He often thanked his English teacher, Miss Marshall, for inspiring him and teaching him the technique of writing short sentences.

### College life

In 1962, Baalu earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Journalism from Addis Ababa University. As an undergraduate, Baalu mixed academic excellence with the practice of journalism. He served as a news correspondent for the Ethiopian Herald (a prominent English-language newspaper) and as Editor-in-Chief of News and Views, a well-known university newspaper. As a young editor, Baalu was often critical of the emperor's administration and his government's policies, which at times forced Baalu to interrupt his school and go into hiding.

Despite these challenges, Baalu earned a full scholarship and obtained a master's degree in Political Science and Journalism from Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

### **Professional life**

BaalugirmaLate in 1963, Baalu returned to Ethiopia and began his career in the Ministry of Information as Editor-in-Chief of Ye'Zareyitu Ethiopia, a weekly newspaper published in the Amharic language.

In 1965, he was appointed Editor-in-Chief of Addis Reporter, a weekly magazine published in the English language. After three years of outstanding service, Baalu left the Addis Reporter and became Editor-in-Chief of the Ethiopian Herald, a daily English-language newspaper.

The early stage of his professional life did not go without incidents. Once he was suspended from his editorship role over a controversial editorial he had written in Addis Reporter, a weekly magazine published in the English language. Later, when returned to work, he had to accept a salary cut.

From 1970 to 1974, Baalu served as Editor-in-Chief of Addis Zemen, a mainstream daily newspaper published in the Amharic language. During the country-wide violence and profound political change in 1974, Addis Zemen, under the editorship of Baalu, remained the only unbiased and trusted source of information.

While he was the Editor-in-Chief of Addis Zemen, Baalu also wrote two of his most popular novels, KadmasBasahger (Beyond the Horizon) and Ye'hillaDewel (The Bell of Conscience).

In 1974, Baalu left Addis Zemen and became Deputy General Manager of the Ethiopian News Agency. Within a year, he was promoted to the General Manager position and remained in that



post until 1977. At the end of 1977, Baalu became the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information.

In addition to being a journalist and writer, Baalu served as guest lecturer of creative writing at Addis Ababa University.

Throughout his career, Baalu was known for his passion for his work, integrity, and willingness to defy the powerful. He was never afraid to challenge himself and others around him. Baalu was very much liked and respected by his co-workers. Many who had the privilege to work with him considered his leadership exemplary.

### Final days

As Baalu's responsibilities increased, so did his frustration with the absolute dictatorship and lack of freedom of expression. With his passionate and skillful writing, Baalu continued to criticize the government and expose the widespread human rights abuses in the country. The vigorous novelist presented six acclaimed novels, four of which – *Ye'keiKokeb Teri* (Call of the Red Star), *Haddis* (titled after the main character of the book), *Derasiw* (*The Writer*), and *Oromay* (*The End*) – were written while the military junta was in power and human right abuses in the country were at their peak.

Oromay, like his previous novels, captured the social and political affairs of the time. Although no names were mentioned, Baalu depicted high-ranking government officials in the book and characterized them so as to make their similarities to the contemporary leaders apparent to his readers. Of course, the courage that he had shown in Oromay made him increasingly popular, but it also created quite a number of powerful adversaries. Baalu was abducted by the military junta security forces while trying to exercise his right to freedom of expression.

After his shocking disappearance, the military junta classified Baalu as a missing person and circulated a leaflet asking everyone to cooperate in the fake search. A week later, family members found Baalu's car outside of Addis Ababa on the way to Debre-Zeit, but no one has heard from Baalu since. He vanished into thin air, with a big dream and an unfinished manuscript.

Along with his wife, AlmazAbera, Baalu is survived by his daughter, Meskerem, his sons, Zelalem and Kibre, and his granddaughter, Naomi-BaaluGizaw.

09 Apr 2013

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