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AN INTERVIEW WITH ADAM RETA

by Aklilu Dessalegn

DESSALEGN: For you *injera* is not only food, but a model for a literary style in your works and a source of inspiration to philosophize about Ethiopia and its people. Can you share with me a glimpse of your philosophy?

RETA: It is more than a model. It is a metaphor. *Injera* is round. It is three dimensional yet flat. It has holes and yet consistent. It is between solid and non-solid. At first the *injera* holes/precisely eyes/ seem to be monads, and yet they are all interconnected through a maze of miniature tunnels. It has a contrasting structure signified by opposites and yet all contributing to its whole physical “survival.”

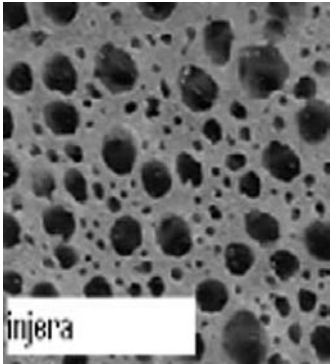
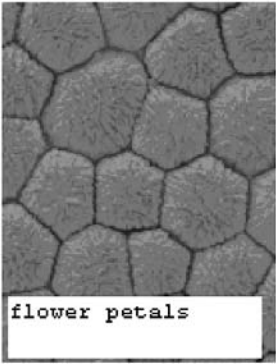
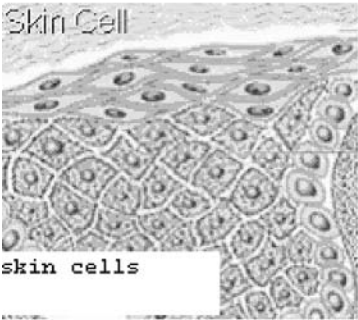
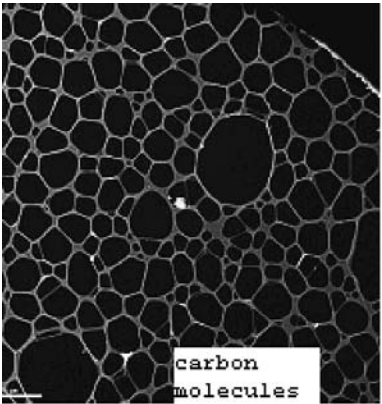
We are used to hearing about traditional fiction as linear or circular. I find the linear story not as realistic as is usually perceived. If one is not sure of the representational honesty of linear stories, one has to look for a different geometric metaphor. The 1974 Ethiopian revolution initiated the beginning of the death of the linear story. The fragmenting elements unleashed then are still working their way through all aspects of life. A society in chaos/disharmony cannot give you individuals that are comfortable in linearity. I have to look for ways to represent such realities and processes. The conceptual image or geometric metaphor we acquire from such disorder is a labyrinth or a maze. What is more pertinent than *injera* in representing this?

Injera has an interesting form. We can mark its genesis from pagan times when the sun was worshipped. In antiquity, the sun was represented by a circle. Our alphabet *tse* ({) is a representation of the sun, or the *aynu* A (;), as the sun was the eye in the sky. I do not think it is an accident we call the holes in *injera* “eyes.” The circle was and is an ancient and universal symbol of unity, wholeness, and infinity. There is also what is called a circumpunct circle with a dot/hole at the middle. It represents the sun and a sun god (called Ra in Egypt . . . what if the “ra” in inje-ra has to do with this?) and the creative spark of divine consciousness within people linking everyone to the creative mind (also to everyone) of a universal “god” thus making each persona “co-creator.” The circle and the dot symbolize the spiritual merging of male and female forces. (Ref) This is a universal/cosmic sensibility.



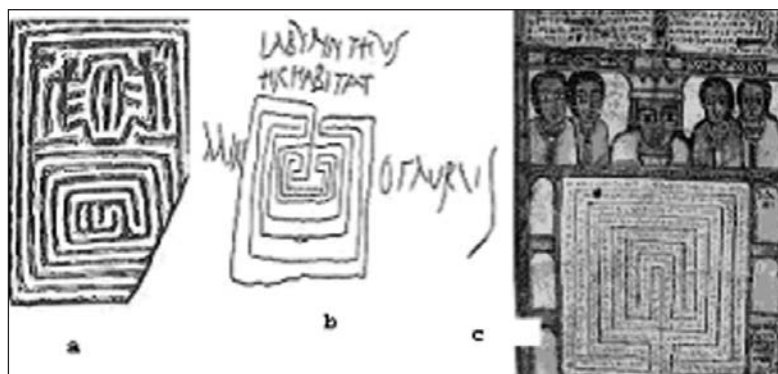
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The meaning of the *injera* form becomes more complex and its meaning certain when the eyes are numerous and the concept and geometry of connectivity is reinforced and radicalized. This model is an ideology about connectivity (visible and invisible) I assume of the ancients who had the habit of planting *mistir* ("mystery") in every lived action, including what we eat and the manner we eat. When the ancients discovered/invented this form they not only bequeathed to us the *injera* as a font of sustenance, but also a transporter of the deep and necessary understanding of the concept of connectivity in the universe, the nation, and the self. If we take a closer look at the *injera* the geometric shape of the eyes are hexagonal. We know that this type of shape is duplicated by human skin cells, bloods cells, wood, metals, soils, etc.



This and such universality of form gives *injera* a serious symbolic power and a sense of planned purpose. The realization of the ancients about the interconnection of the universe as coded in the *injera* can be an instrument in designing a fictional form. Taking *injera* as a model/metaphor also brings us to chaos theory, fractals (for instance the short-short story *keremeloch* in the collection *kesemy ye wrede firfir* was a fractal story), percolation theory (hydrology and hydraulics), and topology. There can even be an opportunity to systematize or mathematize such fiction.

I mentioned earlier about the *injera* as having a labyrinthine internal structure. Actually the labyrinth imagery is represented in two forms. The first is the unicursal labyrinth, which is the classical form. This represents traditional linear stories with a determinate end or closure. We find the unicursal labyrinth in Ethiopian traditional fiction and *kitab*s. Its generic label is called *telsem* / Talisman. It may have a specific name. Below are three *telsems* / talismans from different times and geographical areas representing similar intentions.



- (a) from ancient Egypt
- (b) from pylos Greek / Cretan labyrinth
- (c) from an Ethiopian kitab

The second type is multicursal. This is the *injera* form. It is a story with multiple entrances and multiple exits. (*Itemete lomishita*) multicursals are usually called mazes, while the classical ones are labyrinths.

Plot movements / rhythms / patterns of diction / concepts as memes for me are similar to the flow of the *watt* / sauce inside the *injera*, like water percolating through sponge or the earth's top soil. You can draw a two or three dimensional graph showing the movement of one of the stories in *itemete lomishita*. I did not try it, but can be an interesting exercise. We can also create a *telsem* from a story. Take *zelan*, for instance, the revised story in *alengana misir*. It started as one story and split into four "sub-stories." Figure 1 as a three dimensional cube model of the *injera* can be reduced to the second figure which is the *telsem* of the story.

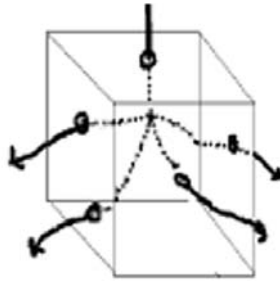


Figure 1.

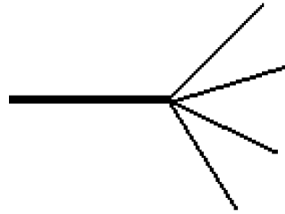
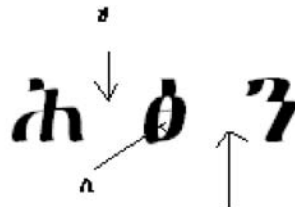


Figure 2.

There are of course stochastic processes involved in this. Outcomes are not *a priori* designed. The story represents one famous principle of chaos called bifurcation. We also find this concept in river systems studies and hydrology. In the future we could be able to draw three dimensional models and *telsems* of complicated novels and stories using digital technology and compare (and enjoy) them not only as fictions but visual art products.

I take *injera* not as a simple metaphor limited to write my fiction. I consider it to be a *root metaphor*. It will be appropriate to define this concept. Originator of the term, American philosopher Stephen Pepper defines root metaphor as “an area of empirical observation which is the point of origin for a world hypothesis” (1967). A *root metaphor* is one which is so embedded within a language or culture that it is often not realized as being a metaphor. Others define root metaphor as *the* metaphor from which other metaphors spring. I believe we can explain our social, political, economic, and historical intricacies using this *injera* metaphor. One area is writing fiction. This type of writing which I currently exercise I call *hisinawinet* (ዘፍጥኑ). One may ask how *hisinawinet* and this metaphor are related. *Histin* is a geez word which designates spaces between two alphabets (h in the figure). Texts can be read because an “empty space” is set between the letters. The spaces within the alphabet are called *mahesten* (ጠፍቤ) (which means womb). Both terminologies have a certain similarity of meaning. These spaces I took as homologous to the eyes or holes of the *injera*. The intention of *hisinawinet* is filling this space. What is read is the filling, which is the new text. I translated this as intertextuality in my interview with *Addis Neger*. This is done actually for a lack of suitable term to accommodate the *hisinawinet*.



There is also the question of the possibility of whether a monolithic short story is a better representation of reality than a *hisined* (y~n{)one. I find my earlier short stories written before *itemete lomishita* as incomplete. *Hisinawinet* in this case becomes a critique of my earlier self.

DESSALEGN: I wonder how you came to think about *injera* in this way.

RETA: I was living in Holland at that time. I did not eat *injera* for four or five years. After such lapse of time when I encountered *injera*, I realized that the thing was unique. Is it not possible that the *injera* is a sort of script/sculpture/a semiotics that is designed to say something about the past and a sort of prescription for the future? The ancients are not as literal as we are. From the design of their alphabets to what they ingest we see a certain message waiting to be deciphered. In order to come to such awareness, I think I had at that moment, what is called an *aesthetic experience*. After that, I tried to question the meaning of that flat bread.

DESSALEGN: My MA thesis (book) has underlined that you are a literary existentialist. How conscious are you about your existentialist philosophy when you write? And how do you describe your relationship with existentialism?

RETA: I am generally inductive. I start from raw data, from life. I have read existentialist writers and philosophy, albeit not everyone and not in detail. I always assume the presence of a non-porous wall between my fiction and the theories of existentialism or for that matter other philosophies. If something leaks into the domain of my fiction, that is just chance or artistic providence. Sure, if I have the time I like to read Heidegger, merleau ponty, Gadamer etc.

DESSALEGN: I have concluded in my study that you seem to assert the existence of God but consider that He does not have a hand in the existence of his creatures. Do you agree with this? What is your belief about God?

RETA: Whatever they believe in, I empathize with my characters. My characters usually worry about their daily affairs, their daily anguish and pleasures. God for them mostly is a rhetorical device. For most of them he is an external. Their pleasure and pain is earth bound. I never wrote a story wherein characters discuss metaphysics and ontology. I do not intend to.

DESSALEGN: Needless to say, almost all of your works are short stories, except your novel *Giracha Kachiloch*. Even the novel is made up of episodes. Why short stories? Does that stem from your belief that life is short?

RETA: You can turn a novel into a short story. Or a short story into a novel. Such conversions make us understand in a way that generic divisions are academic. I give such type-separatism minimum relevance. What *Giracha* shows is this: What we write is a potential.

C A L L A L O O

What we write is not a finished affair represented by a big book called the novel. Even if I am working from an angle called *hisinawinet*, what I currently do is called composite fiction. If we are interested in categories, it is still a category.

DESSALEGN: There are many children characters in your works, which lead your readers to think that you write about children and childhood. Why are they your preferences? Does that have anything to do with your childhood?

RETA: This I think is a misunderstanding. Whenever there are children in the fictions . . . they are in many cases presented with adult antagonists or protagonists. In a way it is also the story of adults. I do not condone the separation of the two. I never did fiction that takes children out of the adult world á la *Lord of the Flies*. Numerically too this “label” is questionable.

DESSALEGN: Another character that repeatedly appears in your works (*Giracha Kachiloch* and “Sphinx”) is a stepmother. In fact, your readers think that you were raised by a stepmother. Hence, they believe that some of your works are partly autobiographical. How do you react to this?

RETA: I never had a stepmother. I write about the world. It is a sort of playing on a negative archetype. You can also say it is a representation of absence, the absence of real parents. (You find a stepmother only in *Giracha Kachiloch*, not in other stories.) Another point: There is often a conjecture by readers that whatever is written in the first person is the biography of the writer. We should read fiction as fiction unless the author says otherwise.

DESSALEGN: I am always defamiliarized by your titles. How do you come up with your titles?

RETA: Good titles are hard to invent. Generally there are two ways. One is you bring the title from the outside, i.e. look for a word or phrase that imposes itself as a title. The second, which I usually prefer is from the inside, i.e. choose a word or phrase from the story itself that can represent the velocity of the narrative. The titles I frequent have a strong vernacular flavor or tone. Their power of defamiliarization is maybe because they subvert the habit where titles are usually grand, difficult, or expected to be mysterious or pretend to be grandiose.

DESSALEGN: It seems to me that you are much influenced by the situation during the Ethiopian military rule, especially by the censorship and the pornographic nature of the writings in those days. I also believe that you are trying to exorcise your memories of those days in your works. How do you believe it actually influenced you?

RETA: The impact of the era is clear in the contexts, environments, and subject matters I raise.

DESSALEGN: It seems that you are always looking for new literary techniques or style as I have learned from your works. Does that have anything to do with your character of being bored easily? What is the real cause for your boredom?

RETA: Boredom and persecution . . . The persecuted have a life full of turbulences manufactured by others. Their trajectories are meandering or erratic. The realization of *hisinawinet* as method is most probably a derivative of such a life. I believe both external (objective) and internal (subjective) issues create the form. It is usually hard / impossible or even pointless to isolate the real or perfect trigger (boredom or persecution?). What I am sure of is, I love forms. This may be due to the desire to encounter the new self, because, Identity is dynamic. Form may be a manner of escape too, as implicit play.

DESSALEGN: You have claimed in your newspaper article (in *Addis Neger*) that there is no such thing as a literary world in Ethiopia. Who and what do you think is the reason for this?

RETA: The literary world is composed of readers, writers, a plethora of critics, great editors, a solid publishing and distribution network. And all these have to function in harmony and/or a certain degree of consistency. I never saw that. By the way the article was an interview . . . given to questions posed by an *Addis Neger* staff.

DESSALEGN: How do you describe being an author in Ethiopia?

RETA: A number of times I have regretted it. But I cannot abandon it. I wish I could. Why should I be a writer in a world where a simple 200 page published or unpublished collection of fiction will give birth to a 2000 page mischief, envy, conspiracies, and other unsavory things? You can say I am a reluctant writer.

DESSALEGN: What do you think the role of the Ethiopian author should be?

RETA: It is hard as a writer to tell other writers what their roles should be. I do not like to take the chair of the preacher. I am not to patronize. Every writer has his own temperament. Yet I can say a couple of shared things: First, get the basic facts right, devoid of prejudgment. Second, do not imitate the other writer. Writing is the search for a singular voice, whatever that is.