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Reader's Guide for Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*

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Reader's Guide for Beneath the Lion's Gaze

Victoria Carson, Abigail Booher, Andrew Hurst

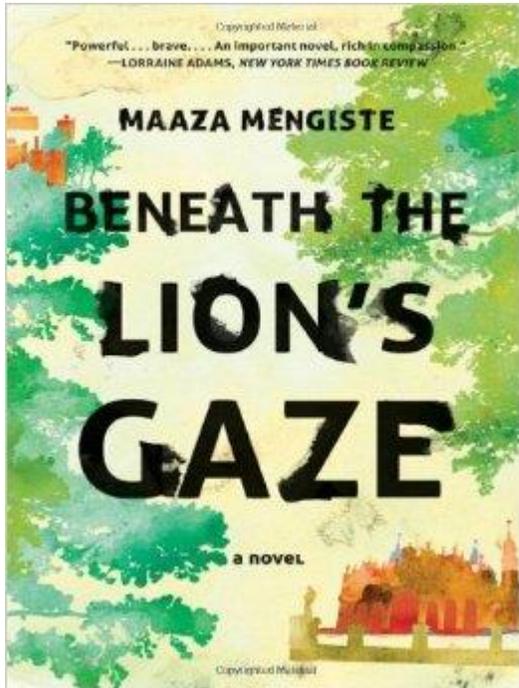


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Thematic Threads

1. *The family as a frame through which to view conflict.*

Maaza Mengiste has deliberately chosen to examine the Ethiopian revolution and its effects through the lens of a family unit. While this family, including all the members of Hailu's compound, has a variety of voices and viewpoints, readers get a local and personal sense of the violence instead of a regional or national one. Each of the family members has a unique approach to and experience of the growing violence around them. Dawit gets involved right from the beginning, Mickey ends up on the wrong side of the conflict, and Hailu, Sara, and Yonas are all initially focused on their personal lives. These different approaches not only give the reader different angles of the conflict, but also show the pervasiveness of the violence. From following Dawit and Mickey, readers understand the separate situations of the revolutionaries and the Derg. Hailu supported Emperor Selassie and did not have any revolutionary tendencies at the beginning of the novel, but when the revolution overtakes and corners Hailu into taking a stand either for or against the Derg, he defies their orders and commits a mercy killing (Mengiste 166). Sara also attempts to ignore the revolution at first (Mengiste 93), but she is also dragged into an active role in the revolution by helping Dawit.

This focus on the family not only gives readers a personal view of the violence and its affects, it also shows how the violence affects familial relationships. Dawit and Mickey were like brothers but find themselves on opposing sides. Yonas and Sara are driven apart as Sara "pushed him away, aware that his presence would only raise questions she couldn't answer" (Mengiste 246). The violent environment that this family are put into forces wedges between members, especially between characters who have experienced violence and those who have not.

As readers view the Ethiopian revolution mostly through the eyes of a single family compound (with brief interludes of Emperor Selassie's perspective), they only know as much as the characters. This lack of omniscience for the reader emphasizes the overwhelming presence of the violence and the inescapability of it; both the characters and the readers don't know if the characters will make it through this violence in one piece.

2. *Violence as both enchanted and disenchanting.*

Descriptions of violence and pain are interspersed throughout the novel, which is not surprising considering it is about a revolution. In many ways, the violence in this book is uncomplicated in the sense that it is committed by a relatively clear antagonist; the Derg is brutal and merciless. However the violence in the novel is complex as it seems to both reject and accept the concept of enchantment according to literary critic Sarah Cole's definition: "Enchantment refers to the tendency to see in violence some kind of transformative power" (1633). The Communist Derg has an enchanted view of violence in that they expect the nation of Ethiopia to be transformed into something better through their violent overtaking. However the results in the novel as well as the results in history discredit this view. The Derg's violence is not represented as accomplishing any good for the nation. On the contrary, although one of the primary complaints against Emperor Selassie was that he "lost touch with his subjects" (Whitman 40), especially as many of his subjects were suffering from a drought and associated famine (Keller 609), another greater famine savaged Ethiopia from 1983 to 1986 during the

Derg's rule. Not only did the violence cause a lot of harm, it did not accomplish the transformative good it set out to do.

On the other hand, the violence in the novel does have strong transformative power. The violence transforms the everyday lives of this family unit, changing their decisions and focuses. After Hailu is exposed to the violence that was committed against the girl in the hospital, he does something that he would have never considered doing otherwise: the mercy killing (Mengiste 166). Sara's entire focus was wrapped up in Tizita, but as the violence infiltrates her world, she says "I don't want [Tizita] growing up thinking we didn't fight back" (Mengiste 234). So on the individual level, the novel seems to accept an enchanted and transformative view of violence.

3. *The appropriate response to social injustice.*

A primary question throughout the novel concerns the appropriate individual response to social injustice and violence. In the first chapter of her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses Virginia Woolf's belief "that the shock of such pictures [of destruction caused by violence] cannot fail to unite people of good will" (Sontag 6). Sontag, however, goes on to question this stance, saying that while for some people these images of the aftermath of violence will trigger feelings of sympathy and longing for peace, the images for others will "quicken hatred of the foe" (Sontag 10). We see these different reactions played out in Hailu's living room as the family watches footage of the drought stricken parts of Ethiopia. As they look at the "gaping faces...destitute land...another body, another helpless mother, another bloated boy," Yonas is moved to tears, Dawit is incensed against Emperor Selassie and his government, and Hailu dismisses it as "More propaganda...Haile Selassie loves his country. We're not being told everything" (Mengiste 50-51). These varying responses expose the complexity of the situation and push the question of what an individual should do in the face of social injustice.

Both the Derg and the revolutionary students are pushing against Emperor Selassie, largely triggered by the starvation in parts of the country. Although the starvation was due to a drought and not malicious violence against the peasants, nearly 200,000 people had died by the end of 1973 (Keller 611) and the revolutionaries blamed the government for ignoring the crisis while continuing to live in luxury. The images of famine stricken people (see Figure 1 for an image from the Ethiopian famine in 1984) are very similar to those of victims of war-ravaged lands, and it is easy to understand why similar emotions of outrage would be evoked in groups from multiple ideologies.

The novel takes this macro level dilemma of how a nation should respond to social injustice and brings it down to the individual character's

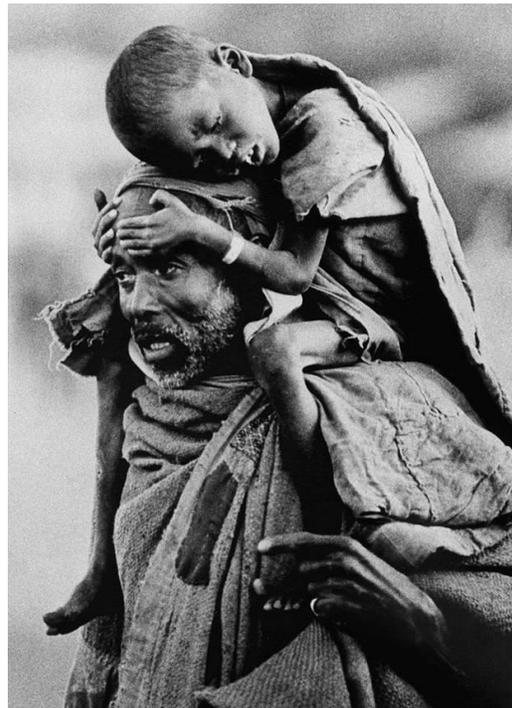


Figure 1: Ethiopia 1984

decisions. The characters are forced to decide where they will stand in this national conflict: rejecting the social injustice of Selassie's rule, rejecting the violence of the Derg, and/or rejecting some of the unjust regulations of the student revolutionaries. Both Dawit and Hailu are forced to make individual stands in the midst of this chaotic and violent environment. Dawit chooses to defy both the Derg and Solomon's warnings (Mengiste 180) when he drags away the body of the girl in the middle of the road (Mengiste 184). His sense of morality forces him to take a stand, even though it puts him in danger. Hailu faces a similar dilemma as he treats the young girl in the hospital. He knows this girl's life will only be filled with more torture if he heals her, but the alternative is to take her life in his own hands. He chooses to take a stand against the Derg and gives the girl a cyanide pill (Mengiste 166). These complex issues of how to respond to violence and social injustice are in many ways the heart of the novel.

Historical Contexts

Emperor Selassie

In chapter 25, the Emperor refers to himself as the "King of Kings [...] the Conquering Lion of Judah" (p. 107). These phrases are references to names of Jesus in the Bible. From reading this in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, one might consider the Emperor to be rather full of himself. And yet, history calls him the same thing. In the *New York Times* in 1975, Alden refers to Selassie as the "Lion of Judah" and that other writers called him "The Conquering Lion" (2). The description certainly has a regal heir, but it also depicts his personal life. Alden notes that "Around the clock, he was guarded by lions" (2). Mengiste even mentions Selassie's lions which roamed the palace within her book (p. 108). This depiction of the Emperor causes the reader to recognize the importance of the lion weaved throughout the novel. When a character is about to die, or is in a dream-like state, they imagine a lion which can lead back to the Emperor and the strength which he represented for his country. Even the title develops the picture of a sudden power (Derg) rising under the eyes of the lion (emperor).

Lost Families

Chapter 62 contains a conversation between Yonas and Sarah which sheds light on a small detail which has great historical truth. In one sentence, Sarah says "And the mothers [...] I had to tell the mothers" (p. 280). Sarah explains to Yonas that she had to tell the families of their dead loved-ones that she had been pulling off the street. This is true to history in that many family members would be lost, and people were not sure if they were dead or alive. Perlez of the *New York Times* specifically looks at person named Daniel whose brother and father had gone missing, "Mr. Daniel fretted that he did not even have the grim comfort of confirming their deaths" (1). In a time of violence and chaos, families were suspected, torn apart, interrogated, and sometimes separated for life, never knowing who was alive and who was dead. Perlez quotes Mr. Daniel who stated, "When we would ask the authorities where they were, we were told they had been sent for development work at a state farm. But we have found the documents. They are dead" (1). Mr. Daniel's description reveals the deception of the authorities which also adds to the chaos and confusion of families trying to trace their loved-ones.

Executions of November 24, 1975

Chapter 18 gives readers a glimpse of the terrifying executions which installed the power of the Derg. Mengiste writes in Chapter 20, “I killed them myself [...] They didn’t want to die [...] The emperor’s grandson, Commodore Iskinder. Prime Minister Aklilu, Prime Minister Endalkachew...” (p. 87). In this passage, Mickey admits to killing the former leaders of his country. While the details within the novel are added, the facts are still the same. Tegegn notes that “The official executions of the Derg began when 55 former officials of the deposed imperial government of Haile Selassie and five officers and non-commissioned officers from the armed forces were executed” (251). Tegegn explains how this moment in history was important for the Derg in that “it signaled that the Derg [...] was committed to holding onto power come what may” (251). This time in Ethiopian history stands a turning point from the age of a monarchy to the era of a dictatorship. The executions of November 24, 1975 began a long “trend” of the Red Terror’s rule where “Selected prisoners condemned to execution were taken away by night from detention centres to a forested area called Kotebe, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, and executed by firing squad. The average number of victims was estimated to be between 25 and 30 at a time, and the executions took place regularly” (253). This information provides a reader with further incite to the horror behind the novel of the Derg’s history of cruelty.

Torture

Chapter 26 introduces the reader to a patient who is to be treated by Hailu – a girl. Mengiste describes the atrocity of her situation when she states, “All of this was covered and the displayed in plastic like a butcher’s oversized trophy. Seeping out of the opening of the plastic bag was the smell of excrement and burnt flesh, shit and cruelty, a new obscenity” (p. 119). The description of her wounds is disgusting and so awful that one might not believe it to be real-like. But history says otherwise. Tegegn’s article provides a list of detailed torture methods used by Marxist power in Ethiopia. Tegegn describes the torturing of women to be “subjected to the routine torture technique of wofe lala [caning the soles of feet with wood or wire]. The most commonly used torture technique applied against women detainees after wofe lala was rape. The torturers were the rapists [...] she would be subjected to additional forms of torture that involved inserting a wooden bar, hot metal rod or broken glass into her vagina. A piece of cloth soaked in diesel would also be lit and applied to breasts and skin and hair would be burnt” (7). The graphic descriptions match with the scars and wounds of the girl’s body described in the novel. Also, a specific name is mentioned, as well. Chapter 53 tells of Hailu’s torturing with the Colonel who discovers that the girl was tortured by a man named “Girma” (p. 252). The Colonel even refers to him as a “monster” and a “butcher”. This man truly existed in Ethiopian history. According to Tegegn, “Girma Kebede killed people in Arat Kilo like flies. He was the one who summarily executed the eight months pregnant Daro Negash” (a character also mentioned within Mengiste’s novel in Chapter 50). Girma was even feared among his own. Tegegn notes that “Girma Kebede was himself executed by the Derg [...] for being too excessive in his killing sprees” (7). These horrifying pieces of history support Mengiste’s accuracy in depicting the terror and violence in Ethiopia for what it really was.

Chapter 56 provides details of Berhane’s death. “Yonas heard the gunshot and turned. There was a small boy lying facedown on the road” (p. 260). In this chapter, Berhane has been forced, after being captured, tortured, and indoctrinated, to march with the Red Terror. He is

young, and can't keep up, so he is shot and killed. While this is a horrifying story of an innocent, young boy, it is not far from the truth of what happened in Ethiopia's history. Darnton from *The New York Times* notes, "Often, the suspects are secondary school students, [who] spread leaflets and take part in demonstrations" (2). Although Berhane was not a deliberate rebel, he did accidentally participate in the exchange of a letter against the government. Darnton continues to add, "'We're talking about kids,' said a diplomat. 'They're 10, 11, 13 year old. They pull a kid in and he gives them names of other kids – it could be someone that he had a fight with at school that day'" (2). This description adequately depicts a kid like Berhane. In the novel, Berhane does not know who gave him the letter, but the idea is the same – the government was torturing innocent, vulnerable children.



This picture is of Mengistu's speech at the Revolution Square during his Red Terror campaign in 1977. It clearly depicts the history of the Red Terror's conquest which is clearly shown in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.

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Reader's Guide: Review Summary

Like many novels, Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* was the subject of many commercial and literary reviews upon its release in 2009. There were four distinguishing topics or methods of craft which were prevalent throughout the ten reviews that I read: at least two appeared in every piece. These reoccurring elements were strong points of the novel, weak points of the novel, the literary placement of the novel and its author, and attempts to theorize the main purpose or theme of the novel. This summary will deal with the ten reviews as they relate to these components.

Strong Points of the Novel

The most consistent aspect praised in the reviews is Mengiste's descriptive talent for sensory scenes and her minimalist prose style: "Action is enhanced by the author's spare, spectacular prose (Corliss)" writes Cody Corliss of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Even Michael Buening of the online pop-culture magazine *PopMatters*, whose review was the most critical, praised Mengiste's "strong individual moments of description" and "her images of horror" which are "sharp and vivid with the smells and sounds of fear (Buening)." Similarly, Aida Edermariam of the Guardian writes "the book is anchored to the body, vivid with smells and fears and violations (Edermariam)." *The New Yorker* and Claire Messud of *Bookforum* offer unique praises: the uncredited *New Yorker* article praises Mengiste's "coiled plotting (*The New Yorker*)," and Messud calls attention to Mengiste's "dauntingly broad cast of characters" as meritorious.

Weak Points of the Novel

The aspect of the novel most criticized is the shallow quality of Mengiste's characters: "[Mengiste's] characters eventually become ciphers for particular factions (Edermariam)." Similarly, Messud writes, "the emotional conflicts between Mengiste's characters are sometimes so tidily spelled out as to seem schematic rather than of genuine human subtlety (Messud)." Finally, Lorraine Adams of the *New York Times*, calls attention to the Yonas and Dawit's characters, writing that "for most of its pages, they are mainly agents of plot (Adams)."

Another point of criticism is the depiction of violence in the novel. Buening calls the torture of Berhane "gaudy" and "kitsch (Buening)" while Edermariam notes that the frequency of violence results in "diminishing returns (Edermariam);" despite this, *Christian Science Monitor's* Geoff Wisner cites "the beauty of [the book's] language keeps it from becoming unreadable" despite its "painful story (Wisner)."

Literary Placement of the Novel and Mengiste

Two reviewers place Mengiste alongside other English-speaking African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, and Nega Mezlekia. Wisner writes that Mengiste “helps to fill that gap (Wisner)” presented by the lack of African Literature written in English or for English speakers. Adams’ analysis goes a little deeper: “For all its beginner’s flaws, ‘Beneath the Lion’s Gaze’ is an important novel, rich in compassion for its anguished characters.” It situates Mengiste with a group of other African writers “whose subject is the continent’s postcolonial civil wars” and how the “colonially oppressed grew into master oppressors themselves (Adams).”

Purpose or Focus of the Novel

In additions to Adams’ conclusion that states that Mengiste seeks to explore how the “colonially oppressed grew into master oppressors themselves (Adams),” many other voices offer their own analyses. Trish Crapo postulates that the novel is about the “power of fiction to drench the reader in the specifics of a time and place,” and the “irreconcilable (Crapo)” qualities of history. *The Oregonian* article points to desire to examine the “richness of Ethiopia’s past” and “the complexity of its current tribulations (Strawn)” as purpose for the novel, while Edemariam and Buening are especially interested in the role religion plays in the novel. “Mengiste has clear metaphorical points to make . . . that a country steeped in authoritarianism and religious fatalism . . . can suffer a terrible moral passivity at times of crisis (Edemariam)” writes *The Guardian’s* literary reviewer, and “It’s within this realm of a uniquely Ethiopian brand of Christianity, combining mythology with the Holy Trinity, that Mengiste’s thematic focus lies (Buening)” says the critical *PopMatters* writer. Finally, in more general application, Nina Sankovitch of Huffington Post’s book section writes that the Mengiste’s focus of the novel is “the durability of hope and universal potential for resilience (Sankovitch)” in times of great duress and violence. *Works Cited*

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Cole, Sarah. "Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124.5 (2009): 1632-1647. Print.

This article creates a categorization through which to understand representations and perspectives of violence and then examines how popular perspectives through history fit into this categorization. Cole distinguishes between an enchanted and disenchanted view of violence, which is helpful for understanding the complex and sometimes contradictory views of violence in Mengiste's novel.

Cowell, Alan. "Religion Remains Heart of Revolutionary Ethiopia." *New York Times* 25 June 1983: L2. ProQuest. Web. 19 March 2015.

Cowell's article touches on three distinct topics that are all relevant to *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. The piece covers the events of the 1974 revolution through a historical recap. More valuable and unique, perhaps, is the topic at the start of the article. The beginning of the piece, as the name suggests, focuses on the role that religion plays for the citizens in a civilization in revolution. Since Mengiste's novel emphasizes importance of religion in Ethiopian society—a passion that is tangibly described by Cowell—and seeks to explore how religion and a Marxist revolution can co-exist, the reader can gain a lot from reading how the citizens were actually impacted, religiously speaking. Finally, Cowell covers family life in Ethiopia and how in revolution it becomes an unstable structure in which the family may be torn asunder by in-fighting or unwilling coercion into the fight—this is obviously an important theme of Mengiste's work.

Darnton, John. "Ethiopia Uses Terror to Control Capital." *New York Times* 10 February 1978: A9 c1. ProQuest. Web. 19 March 2015.

This article deals extensively with the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary conflicts that occurred in 1978 and previously in post-Selassie Ethiopia. The article is split into four parts that focus on the historical background of the conflict, a visual sense of the violence and death in the streets of Addis Ababa, the process of executing and arresting counterrevolutionaries that the government takes, and a closing overview and assessment of the violence. This article functions as a real world, genuine report of the violence that happens in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.

Gebre-Medhin, Mehari and Bo Vahlquist. "Famine in Ethiopia—a brief review." *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 29 (1976): 1016-1020. Print.

This article reviews the situation and the handling of the Ethiopian famine in the 1970s. It was written in 1976, which offers a perspective of the famine and the following overthrow of Emperor Selassie that is untainted by the hindsight of the famines that would follow the Derg's overthrow.

Kapuscinski, Ryszard. *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*. New York City: Vintage, 1989. Print.

Kapuscinski's book is an investigation and analysis into Haile Selassie's regime and

deposition. The book is split into three parts, and the most valuable section in relation to *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* is the middle, "It's Coming, It's Coming." This section focuses on the events that directly led to Selassie's loss of power, including the foundation of Western-inspired Hailee Selassie University—now Addis Ababa University—that fostered anti-monarchical sentiments in its students. This piece is particularly useful to the reader of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* because it gives a detailed explanation of the fall of Selassie from a political standpoint. Kapuscinski provides the reader with details of the emperor's increasingly decadent lifestyle and harmful policies enacted after a failed 1960 coup. *The Emperor* should be read along with Mengiste's novel so that the reader appreciates the events of the novel as the product of a series of international and national political decisions, rather than simply aspects of the isolated narrative of a book.

Mahoney, Anne Louise., ed. *Documenting the Red Terror: Bearing Witness to Ethiopia's Lost Generation*. Ottawa: ERTDRC North America Inc , 2012. Print.

This piece is a collection of mostly historical essays by preeminent scholars with concentrations in African studies. While the entire work is relevant to *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, the reader's attention should be drawn to Tareke's "History of Ethiopian Revolution and the Red Terror" and Firew Kiba's "The Red Terror Trials." The former piece focuses on, as the name suggests, the events that make up the bulk of Mengiste's novel. The former, however, focuses on the events in the post-Derg, post-Mengistu Ethiopia that is outside of the novel's scope. Because the novel lacks a conventional conclusion, this essay will provide the reader with a concrete conclusion as it pertains to the consequences of the genocide, not only for the country, but for its perpetrators.

Mansel, Tim. "Tiglachin Monument, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia." Photograph. Flickr. 28 April 2013. Web. 19 March 2015.



In Mengiste's novel, after the fall of Selassie, she calls attention to the Tigrachin Memorial that stands over revolutionary Addis Ababa: "it was a five-pointed testament to Major Guddu's new military prowess . . . an emasculated memorial to one man's growing rage against his own people" (117). This picture, taken by Tim Mansel, gives the viewer a visual of the memorial as it stands in present-day Ethiopia. The perceiver will see that the park around the monument is somewhat unkempt—note: the weeds at the base of the stairs and the obstreperous bushes and plots of tall grass that have popped up at the bottom of the green background. This image is a representation of the struggle between Ethiopia's past with its non-Communist, non-revolutionary present, as well as the dilemma whether or not to memorialize the savage Derg or to keep the monument as a remembrance of lost lives. This image gives the reader of Mengiste's novel a taste of the contemporary Ethiopian socio-political landscape as it relates to the events of the book.

Whitman, Alden. "Haile Selassie of Ethiopia Dies at 83." *New York Times* 28 August 1975: 1, 40. ProQuest. Web. 19 March 2015.

Whitman provides his readers with an extensive obituary for Selassie which covers, in detail, the emperor's rise to power, his fall from grace, his legacy, and the events of his regnum. This article is an invaluable companion to the novel as it provides a historical framework for the events in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, but more importantly, it complements Mengiste's depiction of Selassie and gives the reader more insight into his full body of work as a monarch. The article also informs the reader on the motivations for the rebellion that takes place in the novel.