

An insight into the literary genius' mind Meet Solomon Dirar



By: Billion Temesghen

Solomon Dirar, a poet, playwright, author, researcher and historian, is one of the most prominent men of letters in Eritrea. He has signed his name in so many memorable Eritrean artistic works. Through his journey, that commenced in early 1980s, Solomon has written over one hundred poems, many of which became lyrics for songs, has written some eighteen plays and four screenplays, has published a series of historical articles in the Eritrean newspaper, Haddas Eritrea, and magazines and has authored four books. He is currently working on a series of chronicles regarding the history of Eritrean workers' movement while his most recent TV series is about to be aired on ERITV. Solomon's craftiness touches hearts and, therefore, Q&A has attempted to give its readers an insight into the literary genius' mind.

Thank you for your time, Solomon. So far, you've put out a big number of diverse works of art. Did you start from a young age? Was this what you wanted to do from the beginning?

I can't say my current occupation was a childhood aspiration. But at school I was fond of debates. It all started when I joined the armed struggle. As was common for the youth at the time, I dropped out of high school to join the armed struggle. In 1979, around the time of the strategic withdrawal, the Front announced that it would enhance cultural activities. Everyone with interest was told to join and talents were being looked for. At that time I was a commissar

and was looking for talented members myself. But that same year I lost my leg in a battle and got summoned to the “disabled unit”. While I was there, in 1983, I heard an announcement on Dmtsi Hafash. They were inviting Eritreans anywhere -- the front itself, the diaspora and wherever -- to participate in a writing competition. The theme was “women’s role in the armed struggle”. I hesitated a lot before I decided to send my piece. Contrary to my expectation I won second place. I kept sending my works to competitions thereafter until I won first place in 1986 . The piece was entitled “Mekete”, and as an award they published it in 1987.

So if it wasn’t for the competition you would have never explored your talent?

May be and maybe not. I would definitely have written poems but not novels or lengthy writing of other genre. What was most impressive about our front is that, yes, we were at war but we were young as well. We were enthusiastic about everything. We were encouraged to explore our talents and manifest it. The front was about liberation, yes, but it was mostly a social revolution.

Let’s take one of your books as a sample of your literally work. ‘The Eritrean Commando’ has been referred to as a ‘must have’ and ‘must read’ book. The book is an account of one of the most memorable missions carried out by a unit of the Eritrean commando in 1984. Commonly known as ‘the eighteen minutes kudos’, the mission that destroyed a whole airport, bringing to ashes Derg’s airforce base in only 18 minutes, became a myth. You turned that into a book. Can you tell us what inspired you and how you recorded the events in the form of a book?

There are millions of instances in our history that are difficult to believe. Eritreans go beyond the earthly power for national causes. And this, ‘the eighteen minutes kudos’, was one of the many instances. You correctly said that it became a myth. Especially amongst the youngest generations as it was a heroic feat that was carried out in a clean way with the fall of only one martyr, freedom fighter Mebrahitu Gebrihiwet. When you hear such things you might believe it is indeed surreal. Therefore, that is how that specific event became a myth. I wanted to document the event even before Independence. I got the idea while talking to a comrade, Andebrahan Berhe. I kept my research even after Independence. With the same comrade, together, we first talked about doing research on the event that was invited by journalists, to give an overview of the event. He was not directly involved in the action but he was one of the leaders that oversaw the mission. Though I published his speech in the form of articles, I then vigorously continued my research. After a long time the book was finalized and published.

The mission was eighteen minutes long but the book is big and long.

It is indeed. But I didn't want to write just about the eighteen minutes. I wanted to write about the Eritrean Commando in general. I wanted to learn about the freedom fighters who took part in the mission. I wanted to know how the idea came and how the plans were laid out. In general I wanted the book to capture a piece of our history and all of the people who were characters of the event. Freedom fighters, civilians and inside allies; every single one of them.

Because you did a thorough research, can you tell our readers the main reason behind the mission?

The Derg military was big and strong. War aircrafts attacked us constantly flying from Bahrdar and Harer. Even after the strategic withdrawal war aircrafts were still attacking us. But this time, flying from the Asmara Airport. They assembled all of their aircrafts in Asmara and moved their main base here. Burning the Derg airbase was first proposed in 1979 though the mission was carried out after an investigation of five years in 1984. The fact that they had moved to their airbase to Asmara was a golden opportunity to strike their air force while on the ground. The commando units meticulously slipped through the strongest hold of the Derg air base and completely destroyed their airbase in 18 minutes!

What inspires you the most to write your books, carry out research and write screenplays?

Our people, our history, our struggle and every social aspect that defines us.

And if you were to elaborate ...

We are a community that has a long history. We are few, diverse but incredibly united. We stand up for each other no matter what. Peace or not, what matters the most to us as a people is 'us'.

Which leads me to think of your upcoming film series that will soon be aired on ERITV. Can you give us a snippet?

In 1967 Emperor Haile Selassie launched a vast taskforce to persecute Eritrean Muslim communities to introduce religious segregation amongst the Eritrean people. Needless to say it was a brutal and cruel operation that tormented the people but failed to achieve its aim. In Hazemo Sub Zone, that same year, Muslims of the Saho ethnic group and Christians of the Tigrigna ethnic group of a village called Una Gobay were summoned by Ethiopian soldiers and were told to separate in two groups based on their religion. They refused. They refused to separate imploring the soldiers either to kill them together or give them mercy. But regardless damage was done in brutal ways. Villagers of Una Gobay stood

together. Stories like these are common in Eritrea. A similar instance where Christians were attacked was conducted by the British administration through their Sudanese soldiers in Asmara around Abashawl and then the Muslim community came to rescue their Christian compatriots. It is a beautiful story that I always wanted to tell and I am finally able to through the real facts that took place in Una Gobay in 1967.

Before we end can you comment on today's artistry?

If I am to speak about film and motion pictures, the trend in our country, as it is in many other part of the world, is dictated by income. Artists tend to produce films that'll attract viewers and eventually make profit. Making historical pieces is not easy. It takes time and effort. If we introduce an institution or work scheme to encourage our young artists, which by the way are very talented and visionary, I believe that more aspects of our history can be turned into pieces of art.

Thank you again!

Pleasure!

Profile, 22/2/2020