

“Ich bin,” I Am: “For my Sisters, brothers, Cousins, and all Eritreans to Read my Book in our Mother Tongue has an Incredible Feeling,” Bisrat

Sabrina Solomon

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Bisrat Tesfay Negassi is an Eritrean-born fashion designer, author, and cultural curator. Born in Asmara in the early 1970s, she fled with her family to Hamburg, Germany, during her childhood due to the daily atrocities that were committed by Ethiopia’s army of occupation in those times. She pursued a career in fashion design, establishing her label, Negassi, in Paris in 2004. Beyond her fashion career, Bisrat is a co-founder and curator of M.Bassy, a cultural space in Hamburg that showcases artists from Africa and the diaspora. She also serves as the head of the fashion and textiles collection at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (Museum of Art and Industry) in Hamburg. In 2022, she published the book “Ich bin” (I am) in German, which she translated into Tigrinya with the title “Ane iye.” The book launch ceremony, held on March 19, 2025, was for the Tigrinya edition, translated by Engineer Tsegai Teclemichael. In her book, Bisrat explores, with both sensitivity and urgency, the themes of war in Eritrea, migration, and the courageous journey of self-discovery in the face of great adversity.

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“Ich Bin” (I am) is a powerful title. What inspired you to write the book in German, and why was it essential for you to get it translated so that you can share your story with the Eritrean community in their native language?

First and foremost, thank you for having me here. It’s such an honor. My parents represent a history that is also the history of many other Eritreans. The reason I wrote the book was to preserve our parents’ legacy. The book is an autobiography of being born in Eritrea during the war of liberation against Ethiopia’s occupation, as well as the broader history of Eritrea from colonialism to the present day. This autobiography is also about the freedom fighters. Eritrean history is rich with essential stories. We need these stories and this history to understand ourselves, to know who we are and why we’re here, and, in a way, to assert, “I am.”



Growing up in Germany as a refugee was tough. Life can be challenging, but proudly stating, “I am Eritrean,” before 1991 was impossible. We were always asked about our origins because our skin color marked us as different. So, there was racism and all that. However, my connection to my motherland, primarily through art, sustained me. We listened to music on tiny tapes sung by Eritrean freedom fighters, which was one of the best experiences of my life. We received these tapes and heard legendary artists like Fihira singing about our land, our country, our freedom fighters, our flag, and our people. These songs became my daily soundtracks. Even today, on my way to work, I listen to those songs from that era. The energy and pride of being Eritrean, coupled with our shared

experiences and where we are now, is what my book expresses. It's about the pride of saying, "I am Eritrean," today.

Your book explores the profound impact of war, migration, and self-discovery. How did the process of translating these deeply personal experiences into Tigrinya affect you emotionally, and did any nuances shift in the translation?

I wrote the book in German, as it was essential to share my story with a German audience. It was published in May 2022 and aimed to share Eritrean history with the diaspora in Germany and other German-speaking countries, such as Switzerland and Austria. It's time to write our history, by us and for us. I think now is the time. We have a history that must be written and documented.

Emotionally, the German version was crucial for correcting the misrepresentation of our narrative. Translating it into Tigrinya is truly remarkable; I have no words to describe it. My goal is for my sisters, brothers, cousins, and all Eritreans to read it in our mother tongue. It's an incredible feeling.

Having launched your fashion label, Negassi, in Paris in 2004 and now working with the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, how do you see the connection between your work in fashion and your writing, particularly in conveying stories and cultural identity?

The connection is the artistic aspect. The museum is dedicated to art and craftsmanship, and fashion and writing are also forms of art and craftsmanship. Everything is interconnected and mutually supportive. I love challenges, and currently, the museum is producing exhibitions about fashion, fashion designers, and identity, as fashion is linked to identity. So, everything connects, and I wouldn't change a thing.



As co-founder of M.Bassy, you've created a space for African and diaspora artists. How do you believe literature, like your book, contributes to the broader dialogue about cultural identity and historical narratives within the diaspora?

I co-founded M.Bassy with family members and friends to showcase artists from the diaspora and the continent, ultimately aiming to unite Africans. I hope that one day we can unite and become the strong continent we were meant to be before colonialism disrupted our unity. M.Bassy embodies this. If we want to change the world, we must first change our immediate world. I hope the book inspires others to make changes in their own lives. I believe I am my creator and control my destiny. I believe that I can achieve anything I want. We say the sky is the limit, but we can go even further. This is the impact I expect from the book.

Your journey from Asmara to Hamburg is a testament to resilience. What message do you have for young Eritreans who are navigating their paths of self-discovery and cultural connection in a globalized world?

Believe in yourself, regardless of your circumstances. There's always an open door. If one door closes, another opens. I believe in the power of words. If you

say you can make it, you will. But self-doubt and negativity will influence your reality. I believe this is a fact. So, be mindful of the words you project.

With the Tigrinya version now available, do you have plans for further engagement with the Eritrean communities, perhaps through literary event discussions, to further explore the themes in your book?

Absolutely. As I stated at the book launch, I am here to stay. I am connected to my country, regardless of my location. We are both similar and different, and this is what connects us. Resilience is the strength of being Eritrean, and it's within me. I have many plans here. I am here now, and nothing will deter me.



As a fashion designer with your label, Negassi, and as a cultural curator with M.Bassy, how do you envision this work serving as a source of inspiration and connection for Eritreans in the diaspora who seek to explore their cultural identity?

As I mentioned earlier, believe in yourself and be true to yourself. Identity is crucial. Sometimes, we lose our way in the diaspora. However, getting lost is not necessarily a bad thing, as it often leads to selfdiscovery. And the way to find yourself is by embracing your Eritrean identity and taking pride in your history. Believing in this is powerful.

You've created space for artistic expression and cultural dialogue. In what ways do you believe your career in fashion and curating, combined with your

published work, contributes to preserving and promoting Eritrean cultural narratives within the diaspora, and what advice do you have for other Eritreans who aspire to create similar platforms for artistic exchange?

It's interesting; I've been asked this several times. As an Eritrean, anything I create is inherently from an Eritrean woman and daughter. So, it's already Eritrean. You are Eritrean. Go out, spread the word, and be proud.

Is there anything you'd like to add, Bisrat?

I welcome critiques. If anyone reads the book and has criticism, please let me know. It helps us improve. I am also grateful to Eng. Tsegai Teclmichael for translating the book. His German fluency facilitated our communication. He translated the book quickly and did a great job.

Thank you, Bisrat. We hope to see you again.