

# ***DEFIANCE*, A POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL BY THE ETHIOPIAN ABBIE GUBEGNA: THE RIGHTS OF A FREE PEOPLE UNDER ITALIAN FASCISM**

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This article seeks to divulge general knowledge about the varied and rich cultural, linguistic and literary heritage of the oldest African nation, i.e., Ethiopia. In addition, it studies in some detail the impact of European colonialism on that heritage: firstly, Italian and then British colonialism, and finally the constant struggle of the proud Ethiopian people for their freedom against any invader. Among the literary examples provided as case studies, attention will be mainly focused on a 1975 novel —*Defiance*— by the Ethiopian writer Abbie Gubegna. This novel was published in English, but it is based on previous texts in Amharic, the national language of culture and literature. It clearly and effectively symbolizes all the ideas in play: from the struggle against invading Italian Fascism to the deep appreciation of Ethiopia's indigenous culture. The article ends with a discussion of postcolonial Ethiopian literature in English, which until now remains largely unknown for many readers.

**Key words:** Ethiopia, *Defiance*, Abbie Gubegna, postcolonial literature, translation, Italian Fascism.

## ***Defiance, una Novela Poscolonial Escrita por el Etopo Abbie Gubegna: los Derechos de un Pueblo Libre bajo el Fascismo Italiano***

El presente artículo busca difundir el conocimiento general de las ricas y múltiples realidades culturales, lingüísticas y literarias de la nación más antigua de África, Etiopía. Igualmente, se estudiará el impacto del colonialismo europeo sobre estas realidades antes mencionadas, en especial el italiano, aunque también el británico, y la lucha constante del orgulloso pueblo etíope por su libertad ante cualquier invasor. Entre los ejemplos literarios que se aportarán para su estudio, la mayor atención estará dedicada a una novela de un escritor etíope, cuya novela de 1975, *Defiance*, escrita en inglés, aunque con antecedentes en amhárico, la lengua culta nacional del país, simboliza todo lo expuesto de manera clara y efectiva: desde la lucha de liberación contra el fascismo italiano invasor, hasta el aprecio por la cultura propia. Además, se defenderá la idea de la existencia de una literatura poscolonial etíope en lengua inglesa, hecho apenas conocido.

**Palabras clave:** Etiopía, *Defiance*, Abbie Gubegna, literatura poscolonial, traducción, fascismo italiano.

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## 1. Introduction

To begin with, it is not a very well-known fact that, from the late 1960s and early 1970s, most unexpectedly, a new postcolonial African literature in English was born: that of Ethiopia, a nation that officially did not know direct British colonial rule and that has always been a country proud of its political and cultural independence. But the wish for greater international audiences and worldwide recognition prompted a series of writers to adopt English as a second literary language of choice. Abbie Gubegna was one of the leaders of this movement that first started translating fiction and poetry formerly written in Amharic, the official language and first national language of culture, and then producing original output in a peculiar form of hybrid English, which was provided with an unavoidable Amharic flavour in words and phrasing. And, although Abbie Gubegna has proved to be a very prolific full-time writer, *Defiance* is probably his most reputed work of fiction in English.

## 2. Ethiopia

Commonplace remarks are very popular when referring to the Ethiopian nation, its unique history and brilliant culture, while sound visions of its peculiar realities are very scarce. Both claims are not only true, but the former 'commonplace remarks' can also easily be studied in much more detail, whereas the latter scarce 'sound visions' should be promoted to a greater extent.

The claims that Ethiopia is a millenarian nation (one of the oldest nations in the world), an ancient Christian kingdom, the only African state that managed to stave off the onslaught of European occupation and enjoyed continuous sovereignty throughout and beyond the so-called Scramble of Africa of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a respected and equal member of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century international League of Nations (Meredith 2006: 4), which Ethiopia joined in 1923, are not all necessarily true or entirely true.

However old and prestigious this ancient and unique African nation might have been, it was not prevented from suffering the threat of continuous attempts at European colonisation that lasted many more years and decades than those of the brief and traumatic Italian occupation from 1936 and 1941, when British Empire Forces together with patriot Ethiopian fighters liberated Ethiopia in the course of the World War II East African Campaign (Pankhurst 1983: 148–165).

## 2.1. A millenarian Christian nation

The legendary history of Abyssinia – its Arabic name – or Ethiopia begins with the visit of the Biblical Queen of Sheba to King Solomon in Jerusalem in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. Their son, Menelik I, was to be the first monarch of the founding dynasty of the nation and a head of a monarchy reputed to finding their legitimacy in the fact of being a direct descent of such a King and Queen.

Historically an intersection of African and Middle Eastern civilisations, the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC experienced the first great migrations of Semitic tribes from the Arabian Peninsula to the Ethiopian high plateau, which has ever since marked the hybrid nature of the nation, its race and culture.

Around a century later, i.e. the sixth century BC, one of these hybrid Arabic foundations, the kingdom-city of Axum, became preponderant and the precursor of the entire Ethiopian nation and kingdom (McEvedy 1995: 34). Axum reached the height of its power between the second and mid-fourth centuries AD, when the Kings of Axum or Aksum enlarged the area under their direct control and Christianity settled down in the area due to the conversion of King Ezana around the year 355.

Christianity in Africa is sometimes thought of as a European import that arrived with colonialism, but this is not the case in Ethiopia. The Kingdom of Aksum was one of the first nations to adopt Christianity officially, when St Frumentius of Tyre, called Abba Selama (Father of Peace) in Ethiopia, and groups of Christians arrived in the region from 316 AD, converted the aforementioned King Ezana during the fourth century AD, and eventually caused Christianity to be proclaimed the official state religion.

Regarding Ethiopia and Christianity, the following additional facts must also be appreciated (McEvedy 1995: 40):

- The Gospel entered Ethiopia even earlier: probably with the royal official described as being baptised by Philip the Evangelist in chapter nine of the *Acts of the Apostles*.
- For 500 AD, as Rome's sun was setting, Abyssinia emerged as the first royal house outside Rome's direct sphere of influence to adopt Christianity as the official religion of the nation.
- This second-oldest Christian nation has always maintained its Christian character since the fourth century AD thanks to the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church, the daughter of the Patriarchy of the Egyptian city of Alexandria, and closely associated with Egyptian Coptic Christians.

But neither the memory of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, its sound Christian credentials, rich cultural and written literary tradition nor continuous political independence saved Ethiopia from colonialism or prevented its people and lands from grabbing the attention of the imperial European nations of the time, in other words, Italy and the United Kingdom.

## 2.2. Ethiopia and Italy

The first Italian advances in the Horn of Africa region date back to the 1870s when Italian companies first settled in the city of Assab on the Red Sea (Pakenham 2006: 681–694). Years later, in 1882, the Italian government took over this city of Assab, and soon after a second city in the area evacuated by the Egyptians: Massawa. This was the origin of the Italian colony of Eritrea – a region frequently regarded as Ethiopian – located north of Ethiopia proper, and of the direct interventions of Italy in the political life of the African nation, i.e. after King John had been killed fighting the Sudanese Mahdists rebels, much infighting succeeded and Menelik II could proclaim himself Emperor only with Italian backing on 2 May 1889. Consequently, he could not avoid signing the Treaty of Wichale with Italians on 6 September 1889, recognising Italy's 'special interest' in his country (McEvedy 1995: 112). Indeed, the Italians had never made a secret of their intentions in Africa, as during the Berlin Conference in 1884, they notified the Powers, according to the requirements of the Berlin Act, that Italy claimed the entire Ethiopian empire as an Italian protectorate (Pakenham 2006: 473).

This Treaty supposedly sought to promote eternal peace and friendship between Ethiopia and Italy, which it did not do from the very beginning. It was soon disclosed that the bilingual document, which was written in Amharic and Italian, presented a dramatic difference in the wording of its Section 17. The Amharic version said that Ethiopia *might use* the services of the Italian government to contact other European governments. However, the Italian version stated very firmly that Ethiopia *had to use* the services of the Italians to deal with other European powers, which was indeed a loss of sovereignty. When Menelik II realised that he had been cheated, he rushed to denounce the Treaty and Italian claims, but it was too late. Italy had taken advantage of the ambiguity to regard Ethiopia as a protectorate, to communicate the fact to the rest of the European powers, and to get the international approval of the *de facto* situation. The British government, for example, recognised this Italian protectorate over Ethiopia in 1891.

In the early 1890s, Italy was still completing the conquest of Eritrea and, with British permission, taking over Zanzibar's stake in what was going to be known as Italian Somaliland. But as soon as they freed themselves

from the urgency associated with those colonial ventures, they resumed their unfinished Ethiopian affair and were determined to place a definite squeeze on the Abyssinian nation – an annexationist aim that they did not ever try to hide.

Finally, in 1895, the Italians began the invasion of Ethiopia from Eritrea with 10 000 European troops, but, to their grief, they not only underestimated the Ethiopians' capacity of reaction to the ordeal and their warring equipment, but they were also unfamiliar with the land and made many tactical mistakes.

His Majesty Menelik II, King of Kings, staged a dramatic call to wage war on the enemy and soon 100 000 men gathered and moved north to save their nation and their independence. On 1 March 1896, they finally beat the Italians in the Battle of Adowa, a town just south of the Eritrean–Abyssinian border, where Menelik's troops crushed the forces of Italian Generals Baratieri and Baldissera, killing around 15000 Italian soldiers and taking thousands of prisoners.

The Ethiopians surprised the world by defeating a colonial power and remaining independent under the rule of Menelik II. Under the shadow of those fantastic peaks at Adowa, Italy endured the bloodiest defeat – a catastrophe – ever endured by a colonial power in Africa (Pakenham 2006: 475). The whole of Europe learned about that African nation that wiped out a colonial army.

By signing a new Treaty Italy soon had to recognise Ethiopia's unqualified independence in exchange for Italian prisoners, and it was forced to give up its claims to Abyssinia and its hope of linking Eritrea with Somaliland (McEvedy 1995: 114). However, Ethiopia still agreed to let Italy keep Eritrea (González-Núñez 2006: 105–106). This concession on the part of Ethiopia had been the source of much conflict and warfare, and it meant that the desire for the independence of Eritrea, as a different nation from Ethiopia, was born and determined to persevere. After World War II, Eritreans wanted independence but eventually (in 1952) found themselves federated with Ethiopia whether they liked it or not (McEvedy 1995: 120). Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia after a bloody war, *de facto* in 1991, and *de jure* in 1993.

However, that was not going to be the end of the story. Forty years after the Italian defeat, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini who invented Fascism took revenge.

Adowa – that short word – was synonymous with shame and dishonour for the Italian people for many years. As late as 1935, national poet D'Annunzio declared that he still felt the shameful scar of Adowa on his

back.

His words did not fall on deaf ears. On 3 October 1935, the Italians invaded Abyssinia again: that supposedly friendly-allied nation from 1896. Mussolini was determined not only to wipe out the memory of Adowa, but also to construct an East African Italian Empire – an Empire under the sun, as he referred to it – and this time things were done better. The invasion started from Eritrea in the North and Italian Somaliland in the South. He deployed the most powerful army that the African continent had ever seen, sending half a million troops, under the command of General Pietro Badoglio, with aerial bombardment and poison gas (González-Núñez 2006: 105).

After a seven-month campaign, Abyssinian resistance was broken, and on 5 May 1936, Italian forces captured the capital, Addis Ababa. Soon after that, on 9 May, Ethiopia was turned into an Italian province to be added to the Italian possessions in Eritrea and Somaliland, and Mussolini announced the creation of the Eastern Africa Fascist Empire (McEvedy 1995: 120; Meredith 2006: 4–5).

The Ethiopian army and people again offered a fierce resistance, but it was insufficient this time. The so-called *patriots* – or popular militia or guerrilla army – even made an attempt against the life of Italian Vice-Roy Graziani in 1937.

Emperor Haile Selassie had previously managed to flee into exile in England on 2 May 1936. Soon after, on 30 July 1936, he participated in a plenary session of the League of Nations in Geneva (Switzerland). It was a fully momentous historical speech: he demanded the justice due to his people very emphatically, and claimed that at stake was not only the very existence of the League of Nations, but also the principles of international legality. In dire straits, he had to wait five years in exile in the city of Bath.

Haile Selassie, the Negus, definitely knew about the threats to his nation, but wrongly sought the support of the United Kingdom and the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia was a full member, and the principles of international law would suffice and work to protect them. But Mussolini proved that he did not care about international law or the principles of the League of Nations. And England did not risk intervening in a worthless effort to save a peace that was not to last much longer anyway (González-Núñez 2006: 144–145).

### **2.3. Ethiopia and the United Kingdom**

The second European power with a colonial history in Ethiopia was the United Kingdom. The first instance of this was the invasion of British

troops suffered by the African kingdom in 1867 during the reign of King–Emperor Theodore II.

Theodore was the providential figure that the country demanded in one of its worst historical predicaments: he saved it from chaos and restored royal power over provincial barons with manic determination. But he was also a capricious and proud individual. In 1864, because Queen Victoria did not reply to one of his letters, he summoned the British Consul before him, put him in irons and incarcerated him in the fortress of Magdala. To get him out, the British had to send an army from India, an expedition of redcoats in 1867. This force, under the command of General Robert Napier and 32 000 strong, duly marched from Massawa, on the Red Sea, to Magdala, building its own railway as it went. They brought Theodore to heel, captured the fortress and released the Consul in April 1868 and then returned to India. Disraeli's government had no plans then for a new Africa colony. From a financial point of view, it was a disaster that cost the British (and Indian) taxpayer nine million pounds (Pakenham 2006: 681–683).

But things were much worse for Ethiopia and its King. As Napier marched back to the coast, he left the local warlords to scramble for the imperial throne among themselves (Pakenham 2006: 470–471). After Magdala was captured, Theodore committed suicide by shooting himself with a revolver sent to him by the very Queen Victoria. He appeared to have laboured in vain (McEvedy 1995: 107–108).

Many years later, when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, the United Kingdom supposedly played the role of liberator and guarantor of the independence of the African nation. But things were not so simple and honourable.

The whole world of civilized and independent nations accepted the Italian conquest, as the British government officially did in 1938. The priority was not to cross Mussolini. None of the protests and petitions from the exiled Emperor were answered. But in June 1940, everything changed: Mussolini declared war on France and the United Kingdom. After four years of solitary resistance, the Ethiopian patriots thought that the Allies were finally going to support them and their cause.

The British undoubtedly also wanted to beat the Italians in Ethiopia and favour the insurrection, but their overall plans for the country were very different from those of the Emperor's and his fighters. In other words:

- 1) They never criticised the Italian conquest.
- 2) They never recognised the Emperor and his government.
- 3) They did not support a newly independent Ethiopia, but a protec-

torate administered by a European power.

For example, during War World II, the BBC refused to broadcast the Ethiopian national anthem, as it used to do with the anthems of other allied countries: France, Poland, Luxembourg, etc. And on 4 December 1940, a Memorandum issued by the foreign office stated that the Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia was legal, that the war did not make the country an independent state, that it could not be regarded as an allied nation, and that the British government felt free to take any decision on its future.

Consequently, when the British troops liberated Ethiopia, they acted in full accord with these political decisions and the Ethiopian people's struggle for independence and decolonisation began. The sequence of dates is self-explanatory:

- January 19, 1941: The allied army entered Ethiopia through the Sudanese border. It took the British a few months to expel the Italians. All prominence, initiative and leadership was monopolised by the British, who never assigned the Ethiopians anything other than a secondary role.
- January 20, 1941: Haile Selassie, the Emperor, also crossed the Sudanese–Ethiopian border, but the British made every possible effort to prevent him from entering Addis Ababa, once liberated.
- May 5, 1941: The Emperor was finally allowed to enter the capital, but not as an independent sovereign resuming his kingdom, as a full British occupation regime was firmly established.
- 1941–1942: British occupation of the territory continued under the command of Sir Philip Mitchell who, from Nairobi, was appointed head of the so-called Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA). He was a confirmed enemy of an independent Africa. The former leaders of the nation were not granted any role.
- 1942: First post-war Anglo–Ethiopian Agreement. It was a step forward in the decolonisation process, as the British accepted Ethiopia's right to independence, but with many limitations. Most of the territory and the political power remained in British hands.
- 1944: Second Anglo–Ethiopian Agreement. The devolution process continued, but entire regions such as the Ogaden and other restricted areas were still kept under British control.
- 1948: The Anglo–Ethiopian Protocol. Among other concessions, the Ogaden was returned to the Ethiopian government.
- 1954: Third Anglo–Ethiopian Agreement. Ethiopia was definitively



granted full independence and sovereignty.

- 1955: Twenty years later, the British military administration abandoned the country and the colonisation–decolonisation process was terminated.

### **3. The multilingual literature of Ethiopia**

The introduction of writing skills to Africa was by no means a consequence of Western colonisation. For example, a substantial amount of poetry had previously been written in the Islamised areas of black Africa, using the Arabic script. And prior to that, the written art had been known and widely practised in the oldest Christian country of the continent, Ethiopia.

In modern time, sub-Saharan Africa has generated an impressive amount of creative writing. Much of it is couched in the three colonial languages: English, French and Portuguese. But imaginative works have also been produced in some fifty African languages. Apart from English, South Africa has other literary languages such as Afrikaans, Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu. And Nigeria has Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Arabic (Gérard 1993a: 15).

This reality derives from the fact that the vast majority of African countries are polyethnic, multilingual states. Consequently, the great majority of the African population is used to speaking, enjoying or enduring two or more languages in their ordinary lives (Bolekia–Boleká 2001: 31). And Ethiopia's linguistic reality is no exception to this rule. And, in each language, the "national" literature is made up of several linguistic strains (Gérard 1993a: 17–18), and Africa and the study of her literature cannot but benefit by the systematic application of the multilingual and international outlook that is specific to comparative literature (Gérard 1993a: 20).

Another African reality, similar to that of other cultural areas such as the Indian Ocean or the West Indies, is the African writers' conflict when choosing their literary languages: writing in their own native languages, writing in an indigenised version of their European language of choice or writing in the literary standard of the foreign language, with all the identity, hybridisation and reception implications of their decision (Díaz–Narbona 2007: 18–19). In general, most African writers claim that what matters most to them is to feel free to choose the language they want without interference and internal conflict, avoiding, if possible, the so-called extreme positions symbolised by the Achebe–Nguni debate (Díaz–Narbona 2007: 18–19).

Ethiopia, as an African country, shares not only many of these realities and cultural conflicts, but also presents very marked peculiarities of

its own.

### 3.1. Geez

History and Literary History teach that when the Ethiopian Christian Church was founded in the fourth century AD, political power was in the hands of the Aghazi people who had established the empire of Axum. It was their dialect, Geez, that was used for translating the Gospels and other sacred books. For a long time, this Geez literature was limited to translations of religious books from the Arabic and the Greek: they included the Scriptures – the Old and the New Testaments – and the lives of the saints and other holy books. Secular writings in the form of chronicles of the successive Ethiopian monarchs and their reigns were also compiled, such as the monumental *Kebra Nagast* or the “Glory of the Kings”, a literary storehouse of legend and tradition. But the most important literary achievement in the language is a form of hymnal poetry known as *qenè* (Gérard 1993b: 24).

By the thirteenth century, original religious and didactic works in Geez were appearing, together with some translations of Arabic writings. And it is also true that the language continued to be used in writing until the beginning of the present century, although it was meaningless to all but a small number of Church-educated Ethiopians (Beer 1986: 982–983).

### 3.2. Amharic

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, the centre of gravity of the empire had moved south to Amhara country, where a different language – Amharic – was spoken. This language, today's first language of multilingual Ethiopia, is the second Semitic language in the World, after Arabic, and has its own alphabet, inherited from the old Geez alphabet.

But although Amharic became the dominant everyday dialect then, Geez remained in use for religious and scholarly writing. And although it was practised only by a thin, elite layer of the population, which was closely connected with the power of the Church and State, it retained its status as Ethiopia's cultural tongue, and its function was similar to that of Latin in Western Europe or Greek in the Byzantine Empire.

However, some writing, mainly poetry, began to be produced in Amharic in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, covering the secular spheres of life. Because of its secular inspiration, it differed greatly from Geez poetry. It consists mainly of war songs and praise poems in honour of the political and military rulers of the time.

But at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Emperor Theodore II realised that the conservative theocratic structure of the country was anachronistic

and that if Ethiopia was to preserve her independence in the face of Europe's encroachments in Africa, some modernisation was called for. This remained the policy of his successors, Menelik II and Haile Selassie.

One aspect of this process is the fact that the Ethiopian emperors encouraged the growth of a Western-type literature in Amharic, importing European genres and subject matters. Thanks to the introduction of the printing press, a few novels had been published by the time Ethiopia was conquered by Italy (1936). The massacres perpetrated by General Graziani destroyed a large part of the Ethiopian elite, but after the Fascist defeat in 1941, a new generation of writers came to the fore and Amharic writing was resumed and flourished with a remarkable number of novels and plays reflecting the evolution of Ethiopian society (Gérard 1993b: 25).

Consequently, it can be claimed that Amharic, a vernacular for centuries, had to wait until the twentieth century to become a fully accepted literary language. The early 1900s saw the beginnings of serious Amharic writing and, although early Amharic writing tended to be infused with moral didacticism in one form or another, influenced as it was by the traditional association of the Geez written word with ethical instruction, it acquired an ever-increasing sophistication, and much quality work is to be found in the growing body of Amharic literature, which now ranges from serious and original prose to popular poetry (Beer 1986: 983).

### **3.3. Italian**

According to the Summer Institute of Linguistics Ethnologue listings of the languages of the world (Gordon 2005), Ethiopia has 89 known languages, 84 living and 5 extinct. Geez, still the official liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is among the extinct ones. The living ones comprise Amharic, the main official language of the nation, and English, also granted some official recognition as the language of higher education and international communication. Conversely, the Italian language has not left any trace in Ethiopia. So it cannot be regarded as a postcolonial Ethiopian language at all. The invasion trauma was probably too painful to make Ethiopians keep any interest in this European language.

Eritrea and Somalia, however, together with English, still have Italian as a minority living language in their countries, and have known some colonial and postcolonial literature in Italian. History accounts for these differences. Italy ruled Eritrea from much before 1890, when the colony was formally consolidated, to 1940. The Italian Somaliland was founded as an Italian colony in 1889 and became independent from Italy as late as 1 July 1960, when it joined the British Somaliland, independent just a few days before, on 26 June 1960. And above all, they never experienced such

a traumatic relationship with their metropolis.

But the lack of any lasting presence of Italian in Ethiopia did not mean that the colonial experience was not told in a local postcolonial language. It was told, but in vernacular Amharic and European English.

### 3.4. English

Literature in a European language, i.e. English, evolved in Ethiopia in the early 1960s, adding a new arrival to the country's literary tradition, which dates back almost two thousand years.

Contemporary Ethiopian authors have turned to English whenever they have written in a language other than the indigenous first literary language, Amharic. Few non-Ethiopians can read Amharic with its unique syllabic script, and Ethiopian writers have thus felt the same artistic and economic impulses that have moved other African authors to use English or French in order to attempt international recognition.

Furthermore, as a result of the aftermath of World War II, English replaced French as the accepted second language of Ethiopia and the language officially used in all secondary and higher education, as well as in the diplomatic sphere and much of the business sector. In 1961, the Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) was inaugurated. Its English Department was initially able to stress a high standard of competence in the language and encouraged creative writing in English through a number of publications, notably the literary journal *Something*. Other short-lived key titles from the early sixties that were published in English were: *Menen*, *Addis Reported* and the *Ethiopian Mirror*. They were survived by the *Ethiopia Observer*, which has been instrumental in presenting some important English translations of Amharic writing.

Unlike other African literatures in English that emerged at approximately the same time, Ethiopian literature in English has always been concurrent with a strong output of writing in the country's official language, Amharic. Moreover, Ethiopian literature in both Amharic and English is strongly influenced by centuries of writing in Geez, the old Ethiopian literary language, which still survives as a liturgical language in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Beer 1986: 982).

English translations from Amharic, Geez and one or two other Ethiopian languages have usually directly preceded significant creative work in English by Ethiopian writers, and one suspects a stimulus-response relationship (Beer 1986: 983).

### 3.5. Similarities and differences

The previous overview of the multilingual literature of Ethiopia makes it possible to elaborate a list of similarities and differences between this nation's national literature and the literary realities of other African countries and communities:

- The regular distinction between a precolonial African literature, defined as anonymous, traditional, kept by anthropologists and missionaries, oral, difficult to translate, and written (said) in a vernacular African language, and a modern one, usually written in a European language, and which is heir to the colonial experience, enjoys an international reception, and has a known author (García-Ramírez 1999: 26–27), is not valid for Ethiopia. Ethiopia's privileged vernacular – or vernaculars – was always an able instrument for high written culture.
- The fact that the vernacular languages do not enjoy official recognition, and their use is not normalised for administration or education, which enable them to become proper vehicles of modern literary production (García-Ramírez 1999: 27), is not valid either for Ethiopia. Amharic enjoys official recognition and has historically been developed to become a vehicle for modern life and literary creation.
- The claim that European languages may allow greater international audiences for African writers, but that they will never reach their own people whose literacy percentage levels in those foreign languages are very low (García-Ramírez 1999: 27) is valid for Ethiopia as a case study, where English is clearly an elite or minority language. The language issue, whether for literary purposes or for any other domain of life, is always difficult in Africa. Ethiopia's multilingual national literature is no exception to this rule. Some are against European languages because they are interpreted as a remainder of colonialism, notoriously the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938– ), formerly known as James Ngugi. Some are against vernaculars because there are too many and they will only limit communication even among Africans themselves, much more than European languages do, and between Africans and the rest of the world. The Nigerian Chinua Achebe (1930– ) is the most popular supporter of this approach (García-Ramírez 1999: 60). Others favour the use of non-standard, indigenised, hybrid, Africa-developed varieties of the European languages, which have proved to be a polemical option that has not been practised extensively, apart from some local ethnic and linguistic chromatism (García-Ramírez 1999: 28–29).

### 3.5.1. Summary of Ethiopian literature in English

The following informative table on the origin and first developments of the postcolonial Ethiopian literature in English arises from the brief but complete overview provided by David Beer (1986: 982–998). It is fundamental to focus our attention on the fact that ‘translation’ played a key role in the progress of this postcolonial literature in English and how it worked as a bridge facilitating the transit from Amharic to English original literature:

<b>1955</b>	Makonnen Endalkachew (1892–1963) One short novel and two plays Translations from Amharic Typical Amharic literature topics: preserve traditional values and promulgate the teaching of the Church
<b>1957</b>	Anonymous <i>On the Eve of Battle</i> Geez traditional poem translated by Meghistu Lemma and Sylvia Pankhurst Patriotic verse, hymnology heavily reliant on biblical allusion
<b>1961</b>	Tadesse Liben <i>Truth</i> . Short story Translation from Amharic
<b>1962</b>	Anonymous <i>Something</i> Translation of a Tigrinya poem Poetry of social protest
<b>1962</b>	Imru Haile Selassie (b. 1892) <i>Fitawrari Balay</i> (novel) Translation from Amharic Stock moralistic romance
<b>1962</b>	Ashenafi Kefade (b. 1937) <i>Confession</i> <u>First Ethiopian novel in English</u> The story of an Ethiopian in America Typical didacticism of Geez and Amharic writing
<b>1963</b>	Tsegaye Gabre-Medhim (b. 1936) <i>Tewodros</i> . Historical play <i>Azmari</i> . Historical play Ethiopian leading playwright Many plays in Amharic and English Adapted Shakespeare and Molière to Amharic

<b>1963</b>	Eshetu Cole Poetry in English <i>The Traveller</i> <i>That's How We Move Away</i>
<b>1963</b>	Tsegaye Gabre-Medhim (b. 1936) Poetry in English <i>What Price the Wound we Opened</i> <i>In the Tender Eye of Our Love</i>
<b>1964</b>	Afawarq Gabre Yesus (1868–1947) <i>Tobbya</i> Translation of the first novel ever printed in Amharic in 1909 Moralistic story
<b>1964</b>	Sahle Sellassie <i>Shinega's Village</i> Translation by the author from the Chaha language Popular writer of novels and short stories in Amharic
<b>1964</b>	Menghistu Lemma (b. 1925) <i>Marriage by Abduction</i> (drama) Translation from Amharic A satirical comedy of manners The problem of reconciling tribal marriage customs and modern ones
<b>1965</b>	Tsegaye Gabre-Medhim (b. 1936) <i>Oda–Oak Oracle</i> . Play Tribal life and values
<b>1968</b>	Sahle Sellassie <i>The Afersata</i> (his second novel) Written in English Communal life of a peasant society Published by Heinemann Educational – African Writers Series
<b>1969</b>	Solomon Deressa (b. 1937) Poetry in English. French and Amharic <i>Prayer</i> <i>Abyssinian Sixties</i>
<b>1970</b>	Menghistu Lemma (b. 1925) <i>The Marriage of Unequals</i> (drama) Translation from Amharic. Produced both in Amharic and English Comedy of manners
<b>1973</b>	Daniachew Worku <i>The Thirteen Sun</i> Next English novel by an Ethiopian author Conflict between past and present time in contemporary Ethiopia Initially banned in Ethiopia

<b>1974</b>	Sahle Sellassie <i>Warrior King</i> Historical novel: the life of Emperor Theodore, the cultural hero in Ethiopian fact and fiction Subject of considerable amount of Amharic literature Published by Heinemann Educational – African Writers Series
<b>1977</b>	Tsegaye Gabre-Medhim (b. 1936) <i>Collision of Altars</i> . Play Experimental verse drama Total theatre: dance, mime, African masks and rituals, etc.

David Beer also makes explicit his own opinion and critical views of the Ethiopian literature in English that he has studied:

Daniachew Worku's unusual novel, the poetry of Solomon Deressa, and the drama and poems of Tsegaye Gabre-Medhim are undoubtedly the high points of over twelve years of Ethiopian writing in English – writing which, although not occupying a very considerable position in the canon of English creative literature in Africa, is still worthy of attention (Beer 1986: 997).

He also adds a general comment on the future of this literature from his temporal viewpoint: "Writing in the late seventies, one does not know what to predict for the future of Ethiopian literature in English" (Beer 1986: 998). Today, from an early 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, it can be claimed that this national literature in English does not seem to have rendered any number of great works or writers as yet, but more research is probably still needed into the matter.

#### **4. A postcolonial national literature?**

Can Ethiopia claim to have produced, for better or worse, a post-colonial national literature in English? This is a most intriguing question, especially after having analysed that the country was neither aloof nor unaffected by European colonialism and postcolonialism – which indeed extended from before 1867 to 1955 – as is commonly thought (the only African nation not to experience the yoke of colonial rule).

In other words, Ethiopia has a long and traumatic colonial and post-colonial past that lasted around one century, involving two colonial European powers: Italy and the United Kingdom. That experience has also enjoyed some literary treatment in one of the main European–African languages: English. And it is a treatment that presents very peculiar traits, due to the existence of a very strong literary tradition in some of its vernacular languages.



Regarding the 'postcolonial' concept, the literature on Postcolonial Studies has traditionally envisaged two different approaches:

- 1) A periodising or chronological term, i.e. colonial territories that had been decolonised were postcolonial and to describe a literary work or a writer as "postcolonial" was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or politics (Lazarus 2004: 2; Vega 2003: 17–18).
- 2) An ideological or political concept that tried to subvert and reorder any unequal power relationship, over and above the historical phenomenon known as 'colonialism', seen under the viewpoint of the colonial–postcolonial dichotomy (Vega 2003: 17–18). The field of study of Postcolonial Theory must focus on the relationship between conquerors and conquered – which is seen as a universal fact that can be experienced nowadays in the inequalities of downtown Los Angeles due to the consequences of globalisation (San Juan 1999: 2–4).

Whatever the concept involved, literary writing has always been a powerful vehicle for the colonial discourse of superiority as well as the postcolonial resistance against those myths of racial, cultural or political superiority (Vega 2003: 17–18). The Ethiopian postcolonial literature in English has not only the right to be termed 'postcolonial' due to its colonial history and chronology, but also due to its universal expression of unequal power relationships and the resistance strategies applied against it. The novel *Defiance*, by Abbie Gubegna, published in postcolonial Ethiopia in 1975, and dealing with a traumatic colonial experience, constitutes an outstanding example of the aforementioned claim.

## 5. Abbie Gubegna

Abbie Gubegna (b. 1934) was intentionally omitted in the previous section on Ethiopian literature in English. He was already a reputed journalist, who had the opportunity to travel to the US, and a popular writer in Amharic when he started to write in English. In 1964 he produced his first work in English, a play entitled *The Savage Girl*, which was the first one to be written in English by an Ethiopian. And in 1975 he published *Defiance*, set in 1937 during the Italian occupation, and a timely reminder to Ethiopians of the hardships suffered once before under oppressive rule. David Beer considers that it is well written, effective and full of vivid descriptions of the atrocities perpetrated by the fascists and the hillside battles. He also emphasised the division of the people between those who collaborated with the Italians and the rebels, and the resistance in general (1986: 988–989).

## 6. *Defiance*

The story of *Defiance* is set in 1937 during the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa: the capital city of the nation and a place where the horrors of war form the background to the lives of a group of freedom-fighters, collaborators with the invading regime and Fascist oppressors. It presents in vivid detail the Ethiopian vision of those trying years and the strategies of resistance developed against the Fascist Italian invader. In other words, *Defiance* can be termed a unique example of conflicting rights and competing discourses during the years of the Italian invasion, made fiction and published years later, in 1975, under the new shelter of an emerging post-colonial context being experienced by Ethiopian letters in those years.

The novel is fully postcolonial for its chronology and for its ideological mindset, but it is possible to be more precise and make use of the typology proposed by Peter Hallward, which can be summarised as follows:

Colonial: clear-cut and absolute hierarchical distinction between ruler and ruled. Division and conflict: forced labour, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft and rape.

Postcolonial: More consensual, harmonious domain, multiple identities, travelling theory, migration, Diaspora, cultural synthesis and mutation.

Countercolonial: liberation struggle, keep the primary Manicheism that governed colonial society, a world of constituent antagonisms and sharply demarcated interests, militant and partisan by definition, engagement, position, mobilisation, division and conflict (Hallward 2001: xiii–xiv).

Under this new light, *Defiance* can be termed an almost perfect example of 'countercolonial' literature, and be interpreted by the power of a term that has already been mentioned: 'resistance', clearly implied by its title, or 'literary resistance', which has been defined as follows: "that category of literary writing which emerges as an integral part of an organized struggle or resistance for national liberation" (Slemon 1996: 77–78). In 1975, the need for resistance against the Italian invader was long overdue, but not the idea, postcolonial and universal, to resist an abusive and intruding power that must be added to the exercise of necessary remembrance in search of collective catharsis.

It is well known to the postcolonial study of colonialism and the long and discontinuous process of decolonisation that the colonised were never successfully pacified and that there is abundant evidence of native disaffection and dissent under colonial rule, and of contestation and strug-

gle against diverse forms of institutional and ideological domination (Parry 1996: 84–85). It is also well known that resistance against colonialism and imperialism has taken many forms and that any imperial or colonial rule necessarily breeds resistance because, unless people are totally disempowered, some at least are likely to question the imposition of others' ways upon their own (Wisker 2007: 59). But fiction or fictional literature is probably the most powerful and time–enduring form or means of 'resistance' and 'defiance', as *Defiance* proves.

## 7. Defiance and translation

As the translation of former works written in Amharic was absolutely instrumental in the formation of a local national literature written in English, an analysis of how translation has marked *Defiance* will undoubtedly render great results in order to assess the originality and characteristics of such a novel.

### 7.1. Defiance and domesticating/foreignising translation

Theory proposals elaborated by the new autonomous discipline of Translation Studies (see Munday 2001) include the dichotomy 'fluency/foreignism' as two opposed translation strategies or methods (Robinson 1998). Regarding the former, Lawrence Venuti also uses the term 'domesticating translation' or 'domestication' to describe this translation strategy in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted in order to minimise the strangeness of the foreign text for TL readers (Venuti 1995: 1–42). Venuti also argues that domestication is the predominant strategy in Anglo–American culture, and that this is consistent with the asymmetrical literary relations of dominance that generally exist between this and other cultures (Shuttleworth 1997: 43–44):

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or non–fiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original". The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse... What is so remarkable here is that the illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text (Venuti 1995: 1–2).

On the other hand, 'foreignising translation', or 'minoritising translation', is the term used by Venuti to designate the type of translation in which a TT is produced that deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original. According to Venuti, here the translator leaves the author in peace and moves the reader towards him. Consequently, he proposes the general adoption of this method as a means of cultural intervention in aggressively monolingual cultures and as a means of changing the current state of world affairs (Shuttleworth 1997: 59). In other words, it should be used as a form of cultural and literary resistance.

And this is what Abbie Gubegna and other Ethiopian writers did when they translated, rewrote close versions or imitated their former work in Amharic and other Ethiopian languages in English. *Defiance* is not only a sound example of socio-political, historical, cultural resistance, but it also resists and defies the favourite linguistic and translation practices of the dominant Anglo-American culture that it is targeting. They did not hide their foreign, different culture and way of thinking for the sake of artificial 'fluency'. In David Beer's words, this is what those pioneer Ethiopian writers in English did in those years:

Meanwhile Sahle Sellassie toils rather unsuccessfully with a problem still confronting Ethiopian writers: how to portray cultural setting authentically without burdening the reader with details unrelated to the movement of the story. Few African cultures are as little known as those of Ethiopia, and most writers attempt to inject local flavour into their English Fiction through scattered Amharic terms whose meanings must be found in footnotes or glossaries. Alternatively they provide background commentary and description within the text (Beer 1986: 986).

Postcolonial classic thinkers have frequently dealt with these realities of much postcolonial African literature, but not very frequently from the point of view of Translation Studies. This is the beneficial contribution of the peculiar Ethiopian postcolonial literature in English.

However, a selection of illuminating paragraphs by leading scholars on Postcolonial Studies, such as the following, can be very useful:

Thus, who gets translated from what languages and into what languages is decided not only by questions of quality or representativeness but also by considerations which include the economics of publishing and the relative material and cultural power of readers in different parts of the world. This means that elements of neocolonial relationships must inevitably enter into the process of transla-

tion, since the balance of material and cultural power tends to lie with the former colonizers (Bery 2000: 3).

English has been described as a borrowed tongue... Examples in which the English language no longer retains its original native characteristics after being 'borrowed' are more plentiful... The English language used may indeed become so different from the language as it is spoken in England that it becomes less of a borrowed tongue, because its relationship to English in the country of its native origin has become tenuous... This borrowed tongue is so entrenched in the culture of many of the 'borrowers' that they can become more proficient in it than the 'lenders' (Talib 2002: 100–101).

Some authors, in writing their works in English, have made a conscious attempt to make use of their national, ethnic or religious myths, beliefs, aesthetic outlook, philosophy and even language (Talib 2002: 102).

The project of the reformation of natives' minds, by assigning the mark of the negative to everything African and the positive to everything European, was designed to socialize Africans to despise their history and culture and, therefore, themselves. It was to impart in them, to make them freely accept, an inferiority complex that perpetually yearns for Europeanness (Olaniyan 2000: 269–281).

Among Africans, Ethiopians have never had any inferiority complex whatsoever and have always been very proud of their culture and nation. And so they created a kind of local, hybrid English language full of native words and expressions, without translation or with a translation or a gloss added. According to Vega (2003: 167–169) the types of linguistic overlapping can range from the use of foreign words with or without explanation or translation, to the mixing and/or fusion of the structures of both languages and code-switching. All these mechanisms seek to reproduce the cultural difference involved.

### **Examples**

Besides his omissions and amendments, he addressed the old hero in the polite form of address, *erswo*, on behalf of the fascist general (Gubegna 1975: 3–4).

"If you can tell it to me, I can."

"Porco!"

"Assama, pig!" said the interpreter.

(Gubegna 1975: 13)

"They choose beautiful girls and take them for wives. They simply call them their thigh-maids, *he-tchin geredoch*. They wait with these women until the lucky days when they can with the love of some idle, haughty bitch from the nobility. When these pitiable gentlemen marry their ideal ladies, widows or rejected girls, *kummo keroch*, from the upper class, they reduce themselves to the state of their poor thigh-maids" (Gubegna 1975: 21).

Lady Wesenie and her two daughters were sitting on the verandah and weeping. Deggu bowed to them politely.

"*Tena-Yistilign. Endemin allachihu* – may God give you health for me. How are you?"

(Gubegna 1975: 42)

The *fitawrari*, who was shrouded from head to foot in a thick *bul-luku*, got up from his specially-made, long chair and limped to the door (Gubegna 1975: 46).

"*Be-ente sima le-Mariam* – in the name of Mary," he said aloud (Gubegna 1975: 137).

At the end of the book, a convenient glossary of Amaharic and Italian words is provided (Gubegna 1975: 186–189).

## **7.2. Defiance, self-translation and bilingual texts**

Another area of interest, within the proposal elaborated by Scholars of Translation Studies, for Ethiopian postcolonial literature in English is that concerned with the study of self-translation and, consequently, bilingual texts.

'Self-translation' or 'autotranslation' has traditionally been defined as the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself, having aroused many debates on the issue of 'faithfulness', as the author-translator will feel justified to introduce changes to his or her text where an ordinary translator might hesitate to do so (Shuttleworth 1993: 13). Consequently, many scholars have considered 'self-translation' and 'true or ordinary translation' to be two different phenomena.

Hokenson and Munson recently made a solid contribution to this debate with the concept of 'bilingual text' (2007: 1–16), by which they mean the following: "What is the bilingual text? Like Bacon's treatises or Nabokov's novels, the bilingual text is a self-translation, authored by a writer who can compose in different languages and who translates his or her own texts from one language into another" (Hokenson 2007: 1). In other words, a 'bilingual text' is a kind of double language original–

translated–original single text produced by a single author. The level of faithfulness between both versions of the text depends on the decision of its owner: the author–translator, much freer than the regular translator to manipulate his text as (s)he deems convenient. According to this concept, most or all Ethiopian postcolonial texts in English are examples of this kind of texts. Hokenson and Mundon also argue that ‘bilingual texts’ were very common in medieval times when writers used to address both Latin and vernacular audiences in dual texts, and that they are proliferating in the postcolonial conditions of our times. Ethiopia poses a leading example.

## **8. Defiance and interpreting**

As seen in previous sections, ‘translation’ is a term impossible to avoid when studying and trying to understand *Defiance*, and there is another closely associated term, ‘oral translation’ or ‘interpreting’, that may not be neglected under any circumstances.

Abbie Gubegna does not allow any degree of conventional ‘fluency’ in his novel or let his English readers believe that Ethiopian and Italian characters understand each other in their respective language or in one of them. The lack of communication is total between both communities: social, cultural, political and linguistically they are worlds apart. Consequently, most of the novel is constructed by means of dialogues between the main characters with the help of interpreters.

The important social role of interpreters has always been well known, but there are special historical events that make their presence unavoidable and the need for their skill fundamental. And this is usually due to unexpected circumstances. This is what happened during the few years in which Italy invaded Ethiopia, when neither the conquerors nor the conquered had any proficiency in the other language, whether Amharic or Italian (Alonso 2007: 209). And when their labour is also performed in a situation of conflict, it is not only fundamental, but very delicate, and their power to manipulate information and events is greater. And this is what Abbie Gubegna is determined not to hide and tells in his story in full detail.

### **8.1. Defiance, conflict, translation and interpreting**

A volume devoted to the subject matter of translation and conflict combined (Baker) was published in 2006. ‘Conflict’ is defined as a situation in which two and more parties seek to undermine each other because they have incompatible goals, competing interests or fundamentally different values (Baker 2006: 166), which are used as the basis for a detailed social study of the influence of conflict on the production and translation of texts. The conflict, resistance or defiance strategies narrated and described in Abbie Gubegna’s novel provide a perfect case study for the analysis of

'conflict' and 'oral translation' or 'interpreting', a claim that can be appreciated in the following quotes from the book.

### **Examples**

Throughout the story, patriot interpreters make use of their linguistic power and try to cheat their Italian patrons to protect, to advise or even to save the poor Ethiopian victims that happen to be under their influence. This behaviour frequently places their physical integrity and security at risk:

"How such a crippled, shrivelled old man can dare speak such words against the mighty fascist government! Ass! I will show you," said the general. He got up from his chair.

The *fitawari* was quiet. And his indifference increased the general's anger.

"Why doesn't he respond? Tell him. *Porco!*" said the general to the interpreter.

The interpreter tried to amend the general's rude utterance by omitting some strong words and adding moderate ones (Gubegna 1975: 2).

After translating the words of the general, the interpreter added to the *fitawari*, "His Excellency, the general, graciously would like to hear your humble reply. And you must give your answer with humble and right words." His forehead perspired, and his lips were dry and white as ashes. He felt the accused old man didn't have a chance. He had witnessed so many of his countrymen being butchered for trivial reasons, or for nothing (Gubegna 1975: 3).

Be careful you silly dog! I will call another interpreter and if I find anything distorted I will bury you alive," said the general.

"Please do it, *Signore*," said the interpreter.

The general left his chair, passed the table and flounced over the interpreter. Then he gave the interpreter a kick on his buttocks (Gubegna 1975: 5).

As stated before, direct communication is totally impossible between Ethiopians and Italians, even in trivial everyday situations. There is always a strong need to take recourse to professional or informal interpreters, as shown in the following dialogue:

There was no verbal communication between the two. The general's talk was a mere gibbering to Aster's ears: and Aster's dumbness was a disappointment to the general. He could look at her like



a beautiful statue, but he couldn't tell her anything.

He got up, ran to the door and called his door-keeper, who came running.

"Tell her to come to me," said the general. He flung Aster a quick glance.

"*Getaye wedezith ney yilushal*, – My lord tell you to get over here," said the door-keeper talking of the general in the polite form of addressing Aster in the common form.

(Gubegna 1975: 103–104).

## 9. Conclusion

*Defiance*, by Abbie Gubegna, has enabled a travel in search of the literary past and present of a fascinating country, Ethiopia, to discover the peculiar and unique path that its writers made up their minds to follow to produce a postcolonial literature in English.

The reality of Ethiopia's colonial and postcolonial past has been claimed, and the methods and proposals of both Postcolonial Studies and Translation Studies have been necessary to understand and analyse modern Ethiopian literature. And it has been worthwhile, as a rich field of research has been promoted involving both disciplines.

In other words, much more research is needed in order to discover, study, evaluate and promote Ethiopian literature in English, whether it is made up of translations, free versions or original products. \*🌀🌀🌀

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