

BOOK REVIEW***Finixua Mutam Tenesalech: The Unfinished History of Tigray Women* by Yewubmar Asfaw**

Addis Ababa, Far East Trading PLC, 2011. 219 pp. Paperback, \$15

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Recommended citation:

Gudeta Kebede Asfaw (2017). *Finixua mutam tenesalech: The unfinished history of Tigray women* by Yewubmar Asfaw. *Ethiop.j.soc.lang.stud.* 4(2), 111-115. eISSN: 2408-9532;pISSN:2412-5180. ISBN:978-99944-70-78-5. Web Address: <http://www.ju.edu.et/cssljournal/>.

Yewubmar Asfaw was a former guerrilla fighter of Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). She had dedicated 25 years of her life to the front until she left [TPLF] in 2001. In 2011, she published a book in Amharic that attempts to describe Tigray Women's roles in armed conflict and their marginalization in the governance of post-conflict society in Ethiopia (Mugambe, 2000). This book is the spotlight of this review.

Ethiopian women's status has always remained shaky as compared to that of men (Haregewoin & Emebet, 2003). They have never been treated equally in the social, economic and political sphere (Paulos, 2006). Historically, the beginning of women's movements in Ethiopia has been associated with the Ethiopian students' movement in the late 1970s (Biseswar, 2008a). Particularly in Tigray region, women's associations emerged together with the development of the insurgence of TPLF and it had an explicit agenda of addressing women's equality. By taking this issue as the reference point, Yewubmar has produced a magisterial work that synthesizes the recent past history of Tigray women's involvement in armed conflicts during the armed resistance of TPLF that waged against the Dergue regime (Emebet, 2005). The central concern of the book is to evaluate historical trajectory of emergence and development of women's movement in Tigray during the liberation struggle and the post victory period. Regarding women's movement in the country, Yewubmar adopted an optimistic view. This could be reflected in the name of the book entitled '*Finixua mutam tenesalech*'. The literal meaning of the title seems to imply that Tigray women's question is disappointed but not defeated. She used the term 'phoenix' that symbolizes her persistent sense of hope and redemption of

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the women's movement in Tigray. According to Greek mythology, phoenix is the name of the mythical bird and it symbolized unforgettable power, strength and renewal².

Yewubmar organizes her book in to four chapters. The first chapter addresses the sacrifice of Tigray women for the realization of their freedom. In this chapter, the author first emphasis enlightening occasions in Tigray such as the beginning of the first Woyane Rebellion in 1942/43, the establishment of TPLF and the opportunity created to allowing women to be involved in combat. Thematically, the other issues raised in this chapter are Tigray women's participation in military training and guerrilla movements, women's movements during the period 1975-1982, the second TPLF national congress, and the establishment of TPLF female fighters organization. According to Yewubmar, the motivating factors for younger Tigray women to join the TPLF were 'the perpetuated injustice of the country's political system in general and the repression of women in Tigray region in particular' (p.36). The other factor is the 'red-terror camping of Dergue that made them exposed to death and detention in urban areas' (p.61). The author argues that besides allowing women to be involved in combat, TPLF took reform measures to address women's interest in the liberated zones. Some of the measures were the right of child born outside marriage, criminalization of violence against women and abduction, raising the minimum age of marriage, voluntary system of dowry and equal land and property ownership rights, equal right to divorce and fair share of common assets, equitable access to education, endeavors to reduce women's workloads by introducing appropriate technology, reform in which land was distributed to women over 17 years old, and technical training in ploughing, targeted at single, divorced, widowed and separated women.

Chapter two discusses the establishment of Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT or *Malelit*) in 1984 and women's situation within TPLF. For the author, after a decade, one important measure taken in 1984 was the abrogation of the rule that prohibited marriage and sex between combatants in the TPLF. Despite this, female combatants in the TPLF were denied the rights to organize and assemble in gender line (*Ibid*). The justification was 'MLLT is an organization of members united by a single ideology of Leninism and Socialism other than espousing this outlook; there is no need to carry out other forms of organizations' (p.111-112). In 1987, the politburo of TPLF: labeled the leaders of Tigray Combatants' Women Association as 'feminists' and accused them of choosing other solution rather than Marxism and Leninism for liberation of women. Yewubmar argues that the promise had been given by the TPLF in the first organizational conference held in 1983 to establish and assure female combatants' association institutional independence was rhetoric. This was manifested in the second conference where their association became the vestigial organ of TPLF.

In connection to the external factors that inhabit women from assuming organizational leadership roles within TPLF, Yewubmar argued that the lack of women leadership was not resulted from Tigray women idleness, weakness or lack of assertiveness; rather it was the benevolent and chauvinist perception of male fighters within TPLF. The other point raised in this chapter was Tigray female fighters and

²<http://www.whats-your-sign.com/symbolic-meaning-of-the-phoenix.html>

outcomes of their struggle. In this regard, Yewubmar identified some success and challenges. Relating to the political aspect, particularly in the liberated areas women were not only actively engaged in the local administrative councils having legislative power, but also worked for the respect of ethnic rights. In the cultural and social aspects, as part of female emancipation, regular education was granted and women got the opportunity to formal education and training. With regard to economic aspect, Tigray women realized land ownership rights as their male counterparts. Concerning the challenges, politically they were unable to realize the independence of their association. They also lacked empowerment as dominance of men persisted. Furthermore, there were social, economic and psychological problems as a result of the war where women lost their families and did not get effective social amenities.

Chapter three, which is the shortest section of the book, focuses on the situation of women during the Dergue regime as well as the establishment of the Transitional Government in Ethiopia. One of the main issues in this period was the establishment of Democratic Association of Tigray Women (DATW) in 1992. In the wake of its establishment, DATW started reorganizing Tigray women's association at the Zone, Woreda and Kebele levels. Women in Tigray actively participated in the restoration of the war damaged infrastructure of the region, natural and environmental rehabilitation activities as well as the reestablishment of local government administrative apparatus. They also actively participated in the fundraising activities of Tigray Development Association. The other issue raised in this chapter is demobilization of female ex-combatants by discharging them from service. The government had supported them by offering temporary and limited form of financial compensation and transporting them back home (Beza & White, 2011).

The last chapter deals with contemporary issues such as the rights of women in associations, Ethiopian women and the question of leadership, the policy of affirmative action, and FDRE Constitution and women. Yewubmar recalled that, when celebrating its 20th year's anniversary, EPRDF appreciated the role women played during the armed struggle and promised once again to support Ethiopian women to have strong and independent association. According to TPLF, the major weakness of women's associations is related to the lack of strong core leadership that bears the burden. To tackle this issue, the EPRDF politburo came up with the proposal of replacing the old leadership with the 'new blood' using democratic centralism and insidious machination. As a result, all the old leaderships of DATW were substituted by the new ones in its second national congress of 1995. Concerning the relation between EPRDF and Ethiopian women associations, the chapter implied that EPRDF indirectly controlled and co-opted women associations and retained some of the practices of its predecessors by 'defining a new vanguard view and dominating the agenda of women's emancipation' (Biseswar, 2008, p.135). The final remark one can get from this book is that women's question evolved during the period of armed struggle seemed to be embraced by TPLF/EPRDF as a strategy to win the war against the Dergue. But 'once political power was won, the 'women's question' remained state dominated, concentrating more on how to benefit from them than on what it could do to improve their status' (*Ibid.*).

On the whole, Yewubmar rightly depicts the mismatch between Tigray women's primarily aspiration for political equality and the end result in which government driven women's quest for right led to the compromise of women's emancipation. Yewubmar's

book seems to be subscribed to what Indrawatie Biseswar (2008b) argues about EPRDF's government deliberate distortion or the rhetoric of a state-defined 'woman question' in Ethiopia. According to Biseswar (2008a), EPRDF 'maintains a vanguard position upholding the myth that women will be emancipated if they actively participate in education and employment in state-directed development programmes and other state-ordered endeavors' (p.407). The important contribution of Yewubmar's book is that it put women's questions as an agenda of discussion. Covertly, it gives emphasis to the issue of women's agency in Tigray for the liberation of Tigrayan people. Tigray women's 'participation had been a strong expression of agency beyond an ideal gender norm' (Mjaaland, 2004, p. 71) in Ethiopia. This is because Ethiopia is indeed 'a patriarchal society that keeps women at a subordinate position, using religion and culture as an excuse' (Haregewoin & Emebet, 2003, p. 10). Yewubmar also attempted to show the continuity in the relations between the state and women in general and the regime's top-down approach to address the women's question in particular.

As one flaw of the book, there is no conclusion section that summarized gist of the discussion throughout the book. In terms of approach, the other loophole of the book is that, it is more of personal account and writer's interpretation of the history of Tigray women rather than a researched book in its totality. In doing so, it is not able to take into account the view, perceptions and experience of other potential women informants who, in one way or another, participated in the armed struggle and paid a heavy cost for the liberation movement. On top of this, even if the author's arguments seem to be based on historical and factual evidences, it lacks explicit methodology. This, in turn could generate some doubt on the part of the readers to accept the book convincingly. Last but not least, the author did not start the book by recognizing her neural position during the writing of the book. Some pronouncements of the book may have been influenced by her direct involvement in the Tigray's women question and armed struggle. This may have its own implication to doubt some of the facts in the book and the possibility of bias. Apart from these flaws, this book is an extremely valuable contribution for understanding the political history of Tigray 'woman question'.

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