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**GENDER AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY: THE REPRESENTATION  
OF WOMEN AT THE RED TERROR MARTYRS' MEMORIAL  
MUSEUM**

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**Abstract**

This research examines the representation of women at the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum. The study is based on fieldwork at the museum/memorial site. The paper explores the complex ways in which women's experiences are recalled through gendered narratives. Imagery in photographs, paintings, statues and artefacts is analysed to reveal patterns of gendered memory that have become characteristic of the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum. The findings of the research raise significant questions for the social construction of gendered memories of atrocity. The study recommends that, as nations and groups seek to accurately recall and remember such mass violence against women.

**The Era of Red Terror - Qey Shiber (1976-1978)**

The last years of the Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974) were characterized by widespread student revolts in major towns of the country, by growing dissatisfaction in the army, and by rampant corruption in the highest government circles. Furthermore, a major drought developed into a massive famine in 1972 in the region of Wallo. It was in this kind of uncertain situation that a group of young officers and non-commissioned officers formed the Derg and started coordinating movements within the various units and branches of the armed forces. Finally, they succeeded in toppling Haile Selassie and assuming power in September 1974. (Marcus, 1994; Andargachew, 1993)

On September 12, 1974 Derg, which had started with a slogan 'Ethiopia First' Itiopia Tikdem, transformed into the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC) and assumed full state power. Simultaneously it suspended the constitution, dissolved

parliament and banned all strikes and demonstrations. This roused opposition particularly from students, a university teachers' group known as Forum, the labour organization CELU, the clandestine leftist organizations, notably those grouped around the two influential underground papers Democracia ('Democracy') of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and Yasafiwehzedems (Voice of the Broad Masses) of the Maison—the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement both espoused the Provisional People's Government (PPG). By 1976, Maison was prepared to cooperate with the military government Derg to achieve communism. The EPRP opposed this usurpation of power and called for the immediate formation of a representative and all inclusive PROVISIONAL POPULAR GOVERNMENT which would pave the way for the formation of an elected popular government. Indeed it was ready to wage urban guerrilla warfare in order to bring down the Derg. (Bahru, 2002; Balsvik, 2005)

In mid-1976, responding to a government crackdown on student members of the opposition, the EPRP began to assassinate leading members of the Derg and its client institutions, notably the urban dwellers' associations (kebeles) and this activity is known as the White Terror. On September 23, there was the first of nine officially listed assassination attempts on Mengistu. On October 2, the EPRP assassinated Dr. Fikre Merid, a leading Maison activist and numerous government cadres. Internally the Derg was split by a rivalry between the then temporary chair, Colonel Mengistu and a faction allied against him, which limited his control. This rivalry was resolved at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Derg on February 3, 1977, at which fifty-eight top Derg officers were killed in an hour-long shootout. To affirm his action Mengistu stated Marxist–Leninist doctrine: "we are doing what Lenin did. You can't build socialism without Red Terror" A few days later, Mengistu turned his attention to his rivals outside of the Derg, the foremost being the EPRP. The revolution was to have passed from the defensive to the offensive stage. Mengistu labelled the EPRP's sporadic campaign of assassination the "White Terror" and Lt-Col. Atnafu Abate promised "for every revolutionary killed, a thousand counter-revolutionaries will be executed." Lt-Col. Atnafu began organizing "Defence of the Revolution Squads," distributing arms to Addis Ababa kebele members who were considered to be loyal. In a public speech on April 17, 1977 Mengistu officially began his campaign with a speech in Revolution Square (the present day Mesqel Square) in the heart of Addis Ababa, which included the words "Death to counter revolutionaries! Death to the EPRP!" " When he delivered these words, he produced three bottles of what appeared to be blood and smashed them to the ground to show what the revolution would do to its enemies. At same time, the Red Terror made Maison its target. (Andargachew , 2000; Bahru, 2002)

On November 12, 1977, the Derg Chairman and Head of State, Lieutenant-Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, publicly urged kebele leaders to "spread revolutionary terror" against the Government's opponents, particularly the EPRP. There had been earlier calls for such measures, but the Government's official "Red Terror" campaign began at this time. While the killings and detentions were most numerous and most publicized in Addis Ababa, the campaign was also conducted throughout the country, mostly during 1978. Young people in towns such as Asmara, Gonder, Bahir Dar and Jimma are known to have suffered severely. Nobody knows how many people were killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee abroad on account of the Red Terror.

Opinions differ on the precise number of people the Derg killed in the course of the Red Terror (numbers range from 150,000 to 500,000) Besides killings, Amnesty International alleged different methods of torture were used by the military government. Evidence from the Amnesty International reports and other literature clearly shows that torturing, killing, raping

of women, including young girls; inserting a bottle or heated iron bar into the vagina or anus were experienced by the women. This paper will question the way in which women's suffering, as a category of remembrance, has either been mis-represented or erased from visual and historical narratives of Red Terror. (Amnesty International, 1978; Anne, 2012; Bahru, 2002; Balsvik, 2005)

### **Methodology**

I gathered data between September 2020 and December 2020 focusing on the representation of women in the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum photographs, sculptural art and material artefacts. I took notes, photographs of the exhibits from each Museum section and this imagery became the basis for a content analysis of my research theme.

### **Collective Memory and The Red Martyrs' Memorial Museum**

Collective memory first appeared as a concept in the sociological work of Maurice Halbwachs (1925-1994). In his second book, *La mémoire collective*, published in 1950 he further conceptualised collective memory as the 'living memory' of one's social group. Collective memory is way individuals collectively remember, recall and forget events, people, and places. Collective memory is transmitted from one generation to the next through the media including literary works, statues, monuments, paintings, commemoration days, museum and others. (Constance, 2016; Jeffrey, 2011) There is a long-established association of memory with preservation and storage. It is in this sense that the museum can be seen as much more than a typological collection of evidence of past time frames but, rather, as the storehouse and protector of the memory of humankind, through the objects held, documented and cared for in its collections. Thus museums become places where culture, history and memory meet. But they meet in a form mediated through the process of selection, collection, preservation and display. (Graham, 2011) According to Janet Jacobs "The study of collective memory has become an increasingly significant area of research that examines the ways in which histories of violence and cultural trauma are memorialized through commemorative ceremonies, the construction of monuments and the use of museums as sites of traumatic memory." (Jacobs, 2008)

In Ethiopia the Red Martyrs' Memorial Museum was established in 2010 and is located at the corner of the historical Mesqel Square (the former Revolution Square) in the city of Addis Ababa. The main aims of the museum are found in the inscribed phrase at the base of the bronze statue and they state "Never, Ever Again" in order to memorize the atrocity and the suffering of Ethiopians 1976 -1978. Inside the museum are instruments of torture, statues, photographs of the victims, bloody cloths, bones and coffins, bloody clothes of the victims that recreate the repression that the Ethiopian population suffered in the Red Terror Campaign.

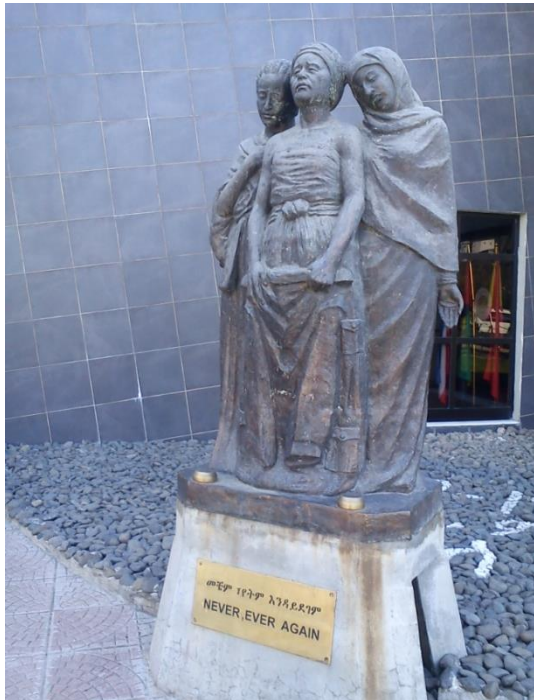
Generally the goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of how gender plays a role as a category of traumatic memory and to explore the tensions that surround the historical construction of women as subjects of torture, atrocity and death.

The overall findings of the research suggest that in the museum women are represented through three visual frames: women as mothers, women as powerless and there is an allegory of Melancholy Women as "Mother Ethiopia". In the women as mothers and as powerless frames, women are viewed through a lens of the traditional patriarchal perspective of motherhood, seeing women as intrinsically subversive and maternal suffering, while in the women as powerless frame, along with the allegory of Melancholy women, the

images symbolically represent the atrocity in the country. What follows here is merely a cursory examination of the representation of women during the Red Terror in "The Red Martyrs' Memorial Museum".

### Women as a mothers

There are four gender themes in the paintings and sculptures found in The Red Martyrs' Memorial Museum; women as mothers, warriors, "Mother Ethiopia" and weeping elderly victims – yet it is the image of women as mothers that has come to dominate the museum iconography.



**Figure 1: Museum entrance statue**

In the entrance to the museum we find the first bronze statue (above, figure 1) which dramatically illustrates, through three-dimensional figures, a sorrowful mother due to the loss of her son and she is holding his ragged jacket; her daughters stand sideways tilting their heads to their mother. The woman on the right is beating her heart which is an expression of deep grief and the one on the left modestly drops down her left hand to express her powerlessness to end the atrocity. The statue is designed to express the motto of the museum "Never, Ever Again" in the hope of bringing an end to such outrage.



**Figure 2 : Emamakebe bush Admasu**

The second charcoal painting by Merid Tafesse represents the story of Emamakebe bush Admasu. The painter utilizes red and black colours; we see a horizon at nightfall, a bloody red moon to symbolize the atrocity. A shadow of a woman standing alone her womb encircled with red paint and in her footsteps we see four shadows of men. Similar to their mothers' womb their heads are also marked with red paint. This red paint represents the loss of her children by the Red Terror.



**FIGURE 3: untitled**

In the above figure, we find prisoners from various social backgrounds. In this painting we see a boy standing in front of his imprisoned mother. This painting shows the double burden of women as mothers and the social crisis or trauma that happened to her baby (or the next generation) following the terror. In contrast to figures, the red background symbolizes violence, anger, and aggression, and it frequently indicates the failure of our social generativity.





**Figure 4; untitled?**

Akin to the above figures, this figure clearly signifies women as a mother. In this painting we find a reddish sky and a leafless tree behind a woman to signify a place of hell. A desperate woman covered with a fully black dress and kneeling down with numerous human skulls that look her children as the skulls seem to have emerged from her womb or mid section of her legs and she belligerently stretches her hand to the sky, crying and mourning a lot.

In general the theme of 'women as mother' statues and paintings are heart rending. They contribute to the construction of an empathic-based collective memory that facilitates an emotional connection to the horrors of the past.

### **Women as a powerless**



**Figure 5 : untitled**



**Figure 6; untitled**

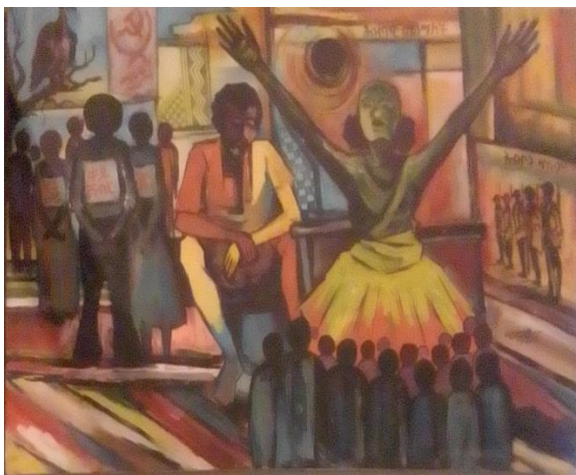


**Figure 7; untitled**

The above paintings illustrate the traditional masculinity of the men and powerlessness of women. In the paintings we see women pleading with the revolutionary guard by kneeling down to keep their husbands safe yet their husbands are standing upright to keep their political beliefs and accept their fates.

In figure five a woman standing at the back is attempting to bribe the revolutionary guard either to take the dead body of her husband or to keep him alive. Despite the fact that women were also active in the political activity especially in the opposition camp (EPRP) equally as their male counterparts, the memorial atrocity paintings narratives fail to depict the real suffering of women as tortured, killed and forced into exile during the period of the Red Terror. Most women are represented as subordinate and subservient.

#### **Allegory of Melancholy Women as "Mother Ethiopia"**



**Figure 8: untitled**



**Figure 9; untitled**

In the above illustration the painters utilize the allegory of feminine symbolism as "Mother Ethiopia". It is common in most artistic works to represent a nation or a country through women. The artists used biblical references to their work. In the Holy Bible it says "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God". (kingjamesVerion, Psalms 68:31, 2004)

In both paintings we find a woman adorned with the Ethiopian flag and stretching her hand out to the God. Illustration nine shows in the centre a saddened woman, her breast is exposed and her eye is covered by cotton twill. The uncovered breast of a "mother Ethiopia" illustrates

her deep sorrow and her lost dignity and the tied eye and the tear express the indiscriminate love of a mother for all of her children.

### Conclusion

In this paper an attempt was made to show the representation of women at The Red Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Ethiopia. The museum to some extent is able to memorize the atrocities committed between 1976-1978. The vital roles played by women either in clandestine activities or in other direct political engagement in the political space in that terrified and horrific time, are neglected. From my critical observation I can conclude that the museum collections and narratives are highly patriarchal and exhibit women through the traditional narratives of women as mothers, incapable and passive.

To sum up, like other memorial centres in Ethiopia, the museum places victimized woman at the centre of the atrocity narratives, aiming to foster an emotional connection to the past that is filtered through images of women's powerlessness rather than representations of their heroism.

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