

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Fig Tree (2018)

Alam Warque Davidian



Alam Davidian on the set of *Fig Tree*, 2018

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur.* Writer-director Alam Warque Davidian is an Ethiopian-Israeli filmmaker. She was born in 1980, in Ethiopia, in the time of the brutal civil war between Mengistu Haile Mariam's Derg regime and anti-revolutionary forces in the country. At the age of 11, Davidian was airlifted to Israel to escape the atrocities of the war. Davidian presently lives and works in Israel and is married to film director and producer Kobi Davidian. They have a five-year-old boy.

*Film.* *Fig Tree* is Davidian's first feature film. It is partially based on the experience of the filmmaker, who, under the gambit of Israel's Operation Solomon that airlifted over 14,000 Jewish-Ethiopian to Israel, left Ethiopia at the age of 11 to escape the brutal Derg regime. *Fig Tree* was entered into the Israel Film Center Festival, during the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival and won the Eurimages Audentia Award for Best Female Director. In July 2018, the film was nominated for Best Picture at the Israeli Academy Awards (Ophir Award). The film won the Dershon Klein Award for Best Feature Film at the 2019 Berlin Jewish Film Festival, and the Jury Prize for Emerging Filmmaker at the 2019 Atlanta Jewish Film Festival. The film's cinematographer, Daniel Miller, won the Best Cinematography Award of the 2018 Israeli Film Academy and the Best Cinematography at the 2018 Israeli Film Competition Award.

*Background.* The initial funding for *Fig Tree* was a \$50,000 prize from *the* Sam Spiegel International Film, which the filmmaker won in 2014. The money allowed Davidian to head to Ethiopia and start shooting, while producers Saar Yogev and Naomi Levari, at Tel Aviv-based Black Sheep Film Productions, were still raising money for the film. The script was initially written in Hebrew and translated later in Amharic for the cast of Ethiopian actors, all of whom were amateurs, except Weyenshiet Belachew, the famous actress, who plays Mina's grandmother. *Fig Tree* was shot for six years on location in the town of Shula ('Fig'), Ethiopia.

### CHARACTERS

*Mina* A sixteen-year-old Ethiopian Jewish girl who lives with her grandmother in the town of Shula  
*Eli* A teenage boy, the neighbor and boyfriend of Mina, who hides in a fig tree **Grandmother**  
*Shwai* Mina's grandmother, who has adopted Eli's mother  
*Salitu* The Christian neighbor and adoptive daughter of Shwai, Eli's mother.

### SYNOPSIS

In the tumultuous years of the brutal Ethiopian civil war, Mina, an Ethiopian Jewish, sixteen-year-old-girl, lives in the neighborhood of Shula, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, with her grandmother, Shwai, and her brother, Retta. The country is a dangerous place, especially for boys and men, as the Derg government has decreed that every male between the age of 12 and 50 must be conscripted to fight the insurgents. The army undertakes constant kidnapping operations in schools and neighborhoods to abduct boys and men and send them to the battlefield. Mina's brother, Retta, has already come back from the war with his left arm missing. Mina's mother, who has managed to enter Israel, is trying to bring in her own mother (Shwai), her son (Retta) and her daughter (Mina). However, Shwai finds it difficult to leave without her neighbor, Salitu, a Christian woman whom she adopted a long time ago as her daughter. Salitu has teenage boy, Eli, who might be abducted at any moment by the kidnapping soldiers. Eli hides in a fig tree and only comes down to fetch food and water. The fig tree is also a hangout for Mina, who is in love with Eli and who hopes that Eli will be able to fly with her family to Israel. Shwai has paid an unscrupulous

smuggler, Hiwet, to secure a flight to Israel for Salitu and her son. Hewitt has found an Ethiopian Jewish family who are willing to pass off Eli as their (recently dead) son if Hewitt can put them on the next flight to Israel. As Mina realizes that Hewitt is trying to swindle the family, she blows the whistle and jeopardizes her own family's trip to Israel. In an act of desperation, Mina asks Eli to have sex with her so that people can be forced to fly them together as husband and wife. The two teenagers have sex under the fig tree. A few days later, however, Eli is kidnapped and enrolled by force as he is visiting his mother.

## SCENES

**Suddenly everyone wants to be a Jew** Sixteen-year-old Mina collects firewood in the nearby forest of fig trees, which she carries on her back to her grandmother Shwai's house. As she approaches the house, she can see the car of Hiwet, the smuggler, and she can hear her shouting at her grandmother that she does not care about her neighbor. The smuggler then emerges from the compound, agitated, shoving some papers in her handbag. She shouts her desperation that suddenly everyone wants to be a Jew. Then she gets in her car, slams the door, and leaves.

**A mother's fear** Salitu, Grandmother Shwai's neighbor, is upset and crying. She tells the grandmother that she is afraid for her son, Eli, that he is done for, and that she wishes she could put him back in her womb. Grandmother Shwai tries her best to comfort her. She promises Salitu that she will not leave for Israel without her. Mina listens, worried.

**Mina meets Eli** Mina goes to her boyfriend's hideout, a fig tree on the river bank and from the top of tree watches Eli fill a jug of water from the river below. She dozes off in the tree. Eli startles her by sneaking behind her and covering her eyes. She screams and runs down. He chases after her across the river and catches her on a sandbank. They lie side by side, breathless. Then, they start a game of riddles. Mina jokes to Eli that she heard his mother say that he is so ugly that she wishes she could put him back in her womb. He finds it hilarious.



**Retta brutalizes Mina** Salitu and Mina are sorting Grandmother Shwai's woven and embroidered fabrics for sale. Mina's one-armed brother bursts into the house, in army uniform, complaining that his gun has been misplaced, and as his sister brings it to him, he grabs her arm and twists it, warning her to stay away from his things. His grandmother scolds him, saying that he should instead thank to his sister for cleaning up the mess in his room. Salitu bids them farewell. The grandmother tells her to have faith, and that everything will work out.

**Salitu is my daughter** The grandmother is not pleased with her daughter, Mina's mother, in Israel. She thinks that her daughter could have said that Salitu was her sister and enabled her to emigrate with her. She tells her grandchildren that Salitu is her daughter even if she is not from her womb, and she will not leave without her. She wants to find a Jewish family that can adopt her and allow her to fly to Israel. Her grandson, Retta, tells her to do whatever she wants as long as he does not stay a day longer in the hell of Ethiopia.



**Different breakfasts** Mina and her best friend are delivering grandmother Shwai's fabrics to her grandmother's favorite customer, Mr. Tadesse. Mr. Tadesse appreciates Shwai's skilled work. His two children are having a good breakfast of cereal and orange juice while Mina, her friend, and her friend's little brother are nibbling on a meager breakfast of biscuits. Tadesse's children look at Mina and her friend with disgust. While Mr. Tadesse is not looking, Mina makes a grimace to scare the children. The older child is not impressed, and she points a knife towards Mina and shouts "witch". The girls get out of Tadesse's house laughing while Tadesse scolds his daughter and says to put the knife away.



**Girl Talk** Mina trips and falls while racing with her friend's brother. She is convinced that someone has cast a spell on her lately. Her friend tells her that she looks like she has something on her mind and insists on knowing what it is. Mina jokes that she is pregnant, which piques her interest even more. "So, you did the thing?" she whispers to Mina. Mina tells her that she is joking and laughs at her bewilderment. Mina runs home, as her friend enters the school yard for the day-shift students.



**Army is at the school** Mina sees some young men run past her. She understands that the army is out capturing able young male for conscription. She runs back to the school to look for Eli. The school yard is a chaotic scene. The male students of all ages are running for safety. Mina sees her friend, who says that Eli has left and is safe. Mina helps her friends secure her brothers and returns to look for Eli. Mina's one-armed brother is among the kidnapping soldiers. He sees his sister looking for Eli, and he reassures her that Eli is not among the captured and orders her to go home. She does not trust him and wants to be certain. He pushes her away.



**Riverbank** She runs to the riverbank, to Eli's hideout. She calls him in vain and starts sobbing. From his hideout in the tree, Eli is looking at her all this time, and he emerges from the tree, throwing tiny figs at her. Exhausted and relieved, she drinks from the river, lies on her back and rests. Eli will not let Mina rest and continues to throw figs at her. She gets up and returns the projectiles at him while asking him to watch himself and not fall. Mina slips and falls down the embankment. Eli calls to her, apologizing and telling her that he is coming down for her.



**The legless soldier** As Mina tries to stand up, she sees the silhouette of a man between the hanging roots of the fig trees, covered in mud, struggling to breathe. Mina rushes to the man. It is a legless soldier in green army uniform. He has a noose around his neck, which is tied to one of the thick aerial roots. Mina tries to lift him up so that he can breathe. He fights her. She persists. She calls Eli for help. Eli comes and lifts the man while Mina cuts the rope with a rock. They pull him out of the muddy entanglement of big fig tree roots. They sit for a while and look at him, exhausted. Eli throws a fig at him to see if he is still alive. Then Mina approaches him and takes a good look. Eli and Mina carry the soldier to the village. The two teenagers tie the man on Eli's back and walk the rocky path up to town. At the edge of the town, an exhausted Eli puts down his load, and Mina asks some curious kids to run and get some help. Mina's grandmother and Salitu arrive. The grandmother asks the man what pushed him to such a desperate act. She tells him that life is tough, but they all must beat it.



**Mina wants to understand the soldier's pain** Salitu urges her son to go back and hide, while she and the grandmother get help to take the soldier home. Alone in the kitchen, Mina tightens her hands around her neck to try and understand the pain the soldier went through. She gives up when it becomes too painful to bear. The grandmother washes the soldier and feeds him. Shwai tells him that her grandson, too, came back with one arm from the war two years after he was kidnapped and conscripted by force. The soldier leaves. Salitu says that life on earth is hell, and she runs to her compound crying. Grandmother Shwai goes after her to comfort her. Left alone with the grieving soldier, Mina does not know what to do. She gets up and leaves him alone for a while. When she returns, the soldier is nowhere to be found. She looks for him outside and sees him painfully dragging himself up the cobblestone street. She follows him at a distance until he collapses with exhaustion in the middle of indifferent passersby. Heartbroken, she returns to the fig tree to be with Eli.





**The photo session** Mina and her grandmother are having their passport photos taken at a local photography studio. To finish the roll and have the pictures ready in time, the photographer takes some more pictures of the grandmother and her granddaughter together



**Only poor boys are kidnapped** Mina and her grandmother go to Mr. Tadesse's to expect a phone call from Mina's mother in Israel. On TV, they watch Colonel Mengistu (head of the revolutionary committee called the Derg) lament the fact that only poor boys and farmers are being kidnapped and conscripted because there is no patriotic fiber in the population to volunteer.



**Mina will not speak to her mother** Grandmother Shwai's phone call comes through. She tells her daughter that she is not happy with her not putting Salitu's name on the list of her relatives to immigrate to Israel. She tells her that she needs money for the smuggler. When Mina's mother wants to speak to her daughter, Mina picks up the receiver reluctantly and cuts off the conversation pretending that it was a technical glitch.



**Mina burns the attendance records** At school, Mina cannot concentrate. She is on the lookout for the military recruiters who will soon come to check the student roster and capture the boys. She manages to get close to the teacher's cabinet, steals the attendance sheet and hides it under her shirt. The recruiters are angry because they cannot find the list of the boys. Mina takes the attendance sheet home and burns it.



**A solution for Eli** Grandmother Shwai wants to know if the smuggler, Hiwet, can do something for Salitu. Hiwet replies that she will find an arrangement for her later. In the meantime, she tells the grandmother about a Jewish family who arrived last week and lost their boy to drowning. He was Eli's age, and she was able to convince them to say Eli was their son, which would allow him to emigrate with them. Their condition is that they must be on the next flight to Israel.

**Eli will not leave his mother behind** Salitu announces to her son, Eli that a family has agreed to smuggle him to Israel, and once there, he will be taken care of by Shwai. Eli is sad. Salitu assures him that Shwai will also find a way to get her to Israel, and they will all be reunited. Eli will not leave his mother behind in Ethiopia. Mina tries to convince him to accept the arrangement.

**Getcho is pretending to be a soldier** Mina sees Getcho, a young boy from the neighborhood, dressed in an army uniform, who is terrorizing store-owners. She slaps him and asks him what he is doing dressed like that. He points his baton at her and warns her never to do what she just did to him again. She defiantly pushes him. He goes away, proudly swinging his stick.

**No guarantee that Hiwet will help Eli** Mina is pulled out of class by the principal because her grandmother has come to fetch her. They are flying out in two days, and they need to prepare for the trip. Mina asks what will become of Eli and says that if they leave before the family that is supposed to help Eli, there is no guarantee they will take Eli.



**The smugglers' rehearsal** Mina, her brother, and her grandmother meet with the smuggler for some last-minute instructions before the trip to Israel. The smuggler tells them to pack as minimally as possible, and that they will be given what they need in Israel. Dressed in an airline agent uniform, the smuggler has them role-play about how to behave at the airport, how to show their papers and where to place their luggage, what to say and what not to say.



**Mina confronts Hiwet** Mina goes to the family that agreed to help Eli and tells them that the smuggler is not being sincere with them, and that her grandmother and she already received their tickets to Israel. Mina asks the smuggler what will become of Eli and is told that Eli will come later. Mina reminds her that this is not what the plan was, that Eli and the Jewish family were to leave first. She accuses the smuggler of being a liar and a swindler. She throws her ticket at her and goes to see Eli. She tells him that the smuggler is insincere and has no intention of helping him.



**Mina and Eli have sex** Mina proposes to Eli that they have sex. This way, he will become her husband and they will be compelled to fly him to Israel with them. Eli is not so sure and starts sweating profusely out of nervousness. The two teenagers start singing a ritualistic rhyme and clapping their hands softly. Then, Mina lies down on her back, on the ground, amid the hanging roots of the fig trees, and Eli joins her.



**Retta whips Mina** When Mina returns home late at night, her brother is waiting for her at the gate. He grabs her by the neck and accuses her of working against her own family by jeopardizing their trip to Israel. He throws her in the compound, and she runs to seek her grandmother's protection. Her grandmother offers her no help and encourages her brother to beat her. Mina's brother beats her savagely. The grandmother only instructs her grandson not to damage his sister's face. Eli comes to the rescue and gets into a fight with Retta.



**Eli visits Mina** Eli sneaks into Mina's room through the window. He tells her that the Jewish family confronted the smuggler, and she agreed to fly them to Israel next week. Mina is doubtful. Eli puts some ointment on Mina's wounds from the whipping administered by her brother. He lies down next to her. They hear Grandmother Shwai open the living room door, and Eli scurries out through the window.



**Love has its logic** Mina's grandmother bought her a new dress for the trip and wants her to try it on. She tells her granddaughter that she, too, was once in love with a boy as a teenager. Therefore, she will not lecture her about love, but she must know that love has its logic, and that one cannot love just anyone. One must choose carefully whom to love and whom not to love, and one's actions must be preceded by thought. Shwai tells Mina that before she acts, she must always take a moment to say to herself that this is her choice and be ready to assume the consequences of her choice. The grandmother exits the room. Mina remains pensive for a long time.



**Eli is abducted** Mina goes to the fig tree to meet Eli. He is not there. At dusk, she goes to church to say a prayer. On her way back, a military vehicle drives past her in the direction of her neighborhood. She remembers that Eli has not taken refuge in the fig tree. Panicked, she runs after the vehicle and sees that Eli has been captured by the soldiers. Her grandmother is fighting them to have him freed. She is pushed aside, and Eli, his hands tied, cries for help while he is being driven away.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Mina** Mina is a caring girl who is living in the context of a violent civil war that causes her to be under immense stress. The boy she loves might be left behind when her grandmother, her brother, and she find refuge in Israel. This traumatic situation causes Mina to make some reckless decisions that threaten not only her family's wellbeing but also her own future.

**Strained** *Fig Tree* starts with Mina, lost in her thoughts, leaning breathlessly against a load of fire wood she just collected from a nearby forest. Mina has been bearing the brunt of the brutal civil war: her

brother, Retta, has returned from war, crippled and ill-tempered. Her school friends are constantly on the run, trying to avoid being abducted and drafted by force; her Christian boyfriend, Eli, is in constant hiding; and the prospect for him of finding shelter in Israel is looking bleak. Mina is a stressed sixteen-year-old girl, who confides in her friend Tzhei that she believes someone has cast a bad spell on her.

*Caring* Despite her brother Retta's brutality towards her. Mina remains for him a caring sister. She cooks for him and feeds him. She cleans up his mess and puts some order in his corner of the house. She does his laundering, and when she hears him groan in his sleep, she comes to inquire and massages his stump to relieve his pain. Mina worries about her boyfriend, Eli, being conscripted, and she goes to dangerous lengths to prevent it from happening. For instance, Mina removes and burns the school attendance records that the army uses to identify the boys and enroll them by force. Finally, there is the admirably caring way with which Mina and Eli rescue the suicidal legless soldier from an agonizing end.

*Reckless* Mina's love for her boyfriend, Eli, causes her to make reckless decisions. Firstly, she jeopardizes her family's trip to Israel without thinking about the effort and money that her grandmother invested in securing the family a flight out of war-stricken Ethiopia. When she suspects Hiwet, the smuggler, of insincerity, Mina rushes to the Jewish family who was supposed to help Eli and tells them that they should insist that Hewitt make them travel before her grandmother, her brother and her travel. Then, she goes to see Eli and proposes that they have sex so that they can travel as husband and wife. In her impulsiveness, Mina jeopardizes her future by taking the risk of being impregnated by Eli.

**Retta** Retta is a violent and resentful character. He lost one arm in the war and came back traumatized and irritable. He often brutalizes his sister, Mina. As if to make those who refuse to go to war pay for his loss, he volunteers in the kidnapping squad to abduct and forcibly enroll boys who refuse to fight in the war that left him without an arm.

*Violent* Retta, Mina's brother, who came back from war with a missing arm. is not a tender brother. He brutalizes his sister when he cannot find his gun after she cleans his room for him. He violently whips his sister when she jeopardizes the family's trip to Israel by denouncing Hiwet's scheme to swindle the family, who have agreed to help Eli fly to Israel. He volunteers to participate in the kidnapping raids that capture young boys to send them to the front. And when his sister comes looking for Eli among the kidnapped boys, he brutally chases her away with his baton.

*Resentful* Retta lost one arm at war, and he is resentful. He tells his grandmother that Ethiopia is a hell he wants to get away from. Yet, while waiting for his papers to emigrate to Israel, Retta still volunteers at night to go kidnap boys to send to the battlefield. It is as if he has an axe to grind with the neighborhood boys for refusing to go to war while he has sacrificed his left arm for it. It is conceivable that Retta made Eli's abduction possible after Eli fought him for beating Mina.

**Eli** Eli is a helpful and loving character. He does not hesitate to put his life in danger to help a stranger who is dying at the end of a rope with which the latter tried to strangle himself. He loves his girlfriend, Mina, and his mother, Salitu. He defends Mina against her brutal brother, and he refuses to leave Ethiopia without his mother.

*Helpful* When Eli and Mina discover a legless soldier trying to kill himself at the foot of the fig tree that serves as their hideout, their first reaction is to come to his rescue. They free the soldier from the noose around his neck, and they put him on Eli's back. With the soldier on his back, Eli walks the rocky slope towards the village and collapses on the outskirts of the village, exhausted. Eli has put his life at risk to come to the rescue of a fellow human being. His effort has drained all his strength, and he would not have had any energy to run for his life were the kidnapping soldiers coming for him.

*Loving* Eli is a loving boyfriend to Mina. He fights Retta for beating her, and he soothes her wounds with some ointment. Eli also will not leave Ethiopia without his mother despite the great risk of being abducted that hangs over him. It takes a lot of convincing from his mother and from Mina for him to consent to take a flight to Israel.

**Grandmother Shwai** Shwai is a resilient and disciplinarian grandmother. She loves her grandchildren and works hard to ensure them food and shelter. Nevertheless, she expects respect and correctness from them. If not, her reprimand towards them can go from mere scolding to corporal punishment.

*Resilient* Mina's grandmother is the backbone of the family. Her cotton weaving business helps her raise her two grandchildren, Mina and Retta. She is also a mother to her adoptive daughter, Salitu, and a surrogate grandmother to Salitu's son, Eli. She tries to give her extended family hope for the future amidst the brutal civil war by comforting them and battling to secure all of them a trip to Israel. Although the prospect of flying Salitu and Eli to Israel seems unlikely, Shwai pays Hiwet, the smuggler, to find a way. It is not clear whether Hiwet will make Eli's and his mother's evacuation possible, but Shwai is resolute and does not give up.

*Disciplinarian* Behind Grandmother Shwai's affectionate ways lies the strictness of a disciplinarian person. She scolds Retta when he oversteps his bounds and starts being inconsiderate to his sister, Mina. She also allows Retta to whip Mina when the girl confronts Hiwet, denouncing her insincerity to the family who agreed to help Eli and saying she has jeopardized their trip to Israel. When she suspects that her granddaughter has slept with Eli, she lectures Mina about the necessity of being logical in the choice she makes regarding whom to love.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**Class** On TV, Colonel Mengistu acknowledges that the boys who are being kidnapped and forcibly conscripted to go fight the anti-revolutionary insurgents are generally boys from the rural parts of Ethiopia and from poor families. Eli is from that group of poor boys compelled to fight Mengistu's war while the wealthy keep their children safe at home. Curiously, the Marxist-Leninist ideology of leveling the classes fails to erase inequities and, instead, accentuates the gap between the haves and the have nots. The kids from poor families are terrorized in their schools and on their playgrounds by the army kidnapers, and their education is cut short by the military junta (the Derg). Mina's brother, Retta, and a child from the neighborhood, Getcho, are some of the youths whose education is compromised while the children of the Derg's officials and of their friends are spared from the war, left to have normal childhood and continue their studies, setting them up for better futures. Furthermore, rich families, as is often the case, are able to pay their ways out of the country. The passage to Israel requires some tortuous ways through unscrupulous smugglers like Hiwet. Not everybody can afford that passage, and therefore, being Jewish is not necessarily a sufficient condition for gaining safety. Grandmother Shwai has to press her daughter in Israel to send them money for the paperwork and to bribe the smuggler. Thus, class determines not only who gets education and a better future, but it also determines who survives the war and who dies of its slaughters.

**Patriarchy** War also reinforces the power of patriarchy. The war that forces boys and men to go to the battlefield also returns them home as tyrants for women and girls. Although the members of the female gender are the ones who keep the household running in the absence of men, when men return from war, they push girls and women aside and reclaim their roles as the preponderant figure in the family. Retta, Mina's brother, is illustrative of this case. He came back from the front with a stump in lieu of where his left arm used to be. The trauma of losing his arm causes him to be irritable and violent. He brutalizes his sister when he cannot find his gun that his grandmother has put away in the process of cleaning his room. He orders Mina around and commands her to launder his clothes. He whips Mina when she undermines the family's trip to Israel by denouncing Hiwet for trying to swindle the Jewish family who was supposed to help Eli fly to Israel. At night, he volunteers in the army to help kidnap boys, and when Mina comes inquiring whether Eli is among the abducted boys, Retta pushes her away and threatens to harm her. Like Retta, Getcho, a boy from the neighborhood, has volunteered for the army. He is proud of his uniform and his baton, which he twirls around, threatening the neighborhood's shopkeepers. And when a shocked Mina asks him what he is doing dressed as a soldier and terrorizing the town, Getcho menacingly points his baton at her and, in a whisper, warns her not to ever again treat him the way she did. Getcho, the little boy of the neighborhood, has been empowered by the war to menace a young girl.

### RELATIONSHIPS

**Family** The typical Ethiopian family is far from being the nuclear family model of modern societies. It is traditionally an extended family whose central pillar is the grandfather or grandmother. In *Fig Tree*, Grandmother Shwai is this pillar. Not only does she raise her biological daughter's children, but she also looks after Salitu, a woman she adopted long ago under conditions that are not very explicit in the film. She also adopts Eli, Salitu's son, with whom her granddaughter, Mina, is in love. Grandma Shwai tells anyone who will listen that even if Salitu did not emerge from her womb, she is still her daughter, just like Mina's mother. So, she fights to have Salitu evacuated to Israel with her family. This notion of family goes even further. Grandmother Shwai's best customer is also considered by her to be a member of her family. She makes sure that he gets a first pick of the cotton fabrics she makes, and he gives up his living room for her phone. For Mina, too, her friend Tzhei is part of her family. She sneaks into Tzhei's house at dawn and slip into the bed that Tzhei shares with her three little brothers. When the military comes looking for the boys, Mina helps Tzhei secure her brothers. Mina's and her grandmother's notion of family extends beyond the confines of their compound and into the town of Fig.

**Love** Love, Mina's grandmother tells her, has its logic. One cannot love just anyone one falls in love with; instead, one must choose whom one can love logically and whom one cannot. Mina is in love with Eli, a young man whose mother her grandmother has adopted as a child and with whom she grew up as a brother. Mina's romantic attachment with Eli makes it difficult for her to establish her priorities, especially whether to leave a dangerous country at war to seek refuge with her mother in Israel. In fact, Mina put Eli's security before hers, and will not leave Ethiopia unless Eli precedes her to Israel. Furthermore, blinded by her love for Eli, she risks her future by asking him to have sex with her so that people will be forced to marry them and fly them together to Israel. Her grandmother, who knows that she has slept with Eli, tells her that her love for Eli is illogical in that the choices she makes undermine her existence. Mina's grandmother is not suggesting that love should be calculated and disinterested. She, too, has raised Eli's mother, Salitu, with pure love as her own daughter. She, too, has been battling to secure Salitu a trip to Israel and promised Salitu that she will do everything in her power to make it possible. This, however, does not mean replacing her wellbeing with Salitu's. It would be illogical love. And illogical love is also what the army is asking the Ethiopian youths to show their country. The army would like that, in the name of some abstract love for a country, Ethiopia, which has thus far given the youths little indication that they matter, the young men of Ethiopia volunteer for missions that they know are suicidal. The army's kidnappers mock the boys that scurry away when they come looking for them. They call them cowards and rats. For the boys, it is a matter of survival. And they will logically not trade their life for 'love' of a country that has done little or nothing for them.

## PSYCHOLOGY

**Resilience** "Life on earth is hell, but we have to beat it." These are the words of Grandma Shwai to those who, like the crippled soldier who wanted to commit suicide or like Salitu, are losing hope. The town of Shula ('Fig') is among the most austere places in Ethiopia. Yet it is one of the most vibrant, too. In the neighborhood of Fig is a notorious artisanal fabric factory managed by women. These women, as we see in the film, are the ones who sustain the lives of the community in the absence of men. Indeed, in the context of the civil war that the military government is waging against armed anti-revolutionary factions, every male person, from age thirteen, is compelled to enroll; those who refuse are kidnapped by the military and forced to go to the battlefield. Thus, men are noticeably absent in the domestic space either because they are killed at war, or because they are in hiding or have emigrated. Thus, the households are run by women like Mina's grandmother and Salitu. It is to women that the responsibility to make life normal for the family falls. Grandmother Shwai's, Salitu's, and Mina's comforting gestures towards the desperate crippled soldier who wants to take his own life are illustrative of the resilience that keeps providing normalcy to a community in the midst of a brutal civil war.

**Loss** War is a cause of loss. For many people, the civil war that pitches the Derg regime against its enemies results in loss. Women have seen their husbands and sons kidnapped and sent to the battlefield to never return or to come back crippled. Grandmother Shwai explains to the legless soldier, who wants to commit suicide, that when her grandson, Retta, was sent to war, she prayed every day to see him return even if with only one eye or one leg. In the end, Retta returns to his grandmother with one arm missing. For the young boys, who are constantly under the threat of being drafted by force into the Derg army, the war signifies the loss of their innocence. Their childhood is cut short. They have no opportunities to explore the



realm of childhood on the playgrounds of the country. Instead, they must hide and constantly watch over their shoulders. Eli symbolizes this youth deprived of a childhood and a future. His universe is the fig tree that shelters him from the kidnapping soldiers. Thus, he tells Mina that the fig tree is paradise for him. For the legless soldier who wants to kill himself, the fig tree is hell. His botched suicide put him in indescribable agony, and he would have died a slow and agonizing death if Mina and Eli were not there to save him. But if this soldier has decided to do away with his own life, it is because his situation of a crippled war veteran has taken away his dignity. He no longer wants to crawl among men who haven't the slightest appreciation of his sacrifice. For Mina, the war undermines her hope of a future life with Eli, swiftly ends her childhood and impulsively causes her to precipitate her passage into the world of the adults: She asks Eli to have sex with her so that they can travel as husband and wife. She loses her innocence for something that will not materialize, for soon after that, she also loses Eli to the kidnapping soldiers. Loss of life, loss of love, loss of innocence, loss of dignity, loss of hope for the future are the cold realities of the war.

**Immigration** Immigration is often romanticized as a departure to a promised land. In the case of people fleeing the atrocities of war, the land of welcome takes on an even more meliorative value, as it necessarily presents itself as a place of better opportunities than what one leaves behind. Yet this is not always true. The trauma of immigration is dramatized in a sadly comic scene in which the smuggler, Hiwet, instructs the grandmother and her two grandchildren on how to present themselves to immigration for their trip to Israel. She asks them to take nothing but a small bag of clothes with them, as clothes will be offered to them in Israel, and to leave all their money in Ethiopia, as it has no value in Israel. The irony of this scene is that it recalls images of the stripping of Jews deported to concentration camps, while it proposes a destination that is Israel. Alongside the trauma of separating people from their possessions, there is the greater trauma of separating them from the people they love. For the grandmother, it's how to leave without Salitu, whom she raised as her own daughter, but who is not Jewish. For Mina, it is how to leave without her boyfriend, Eli, Salitu's only child, knowing that at any moment, he can be kidnapped by the soldiers and forcibly conscripted. It is also the difficulty of leaving her favorite hangout, the fig tree, and her school, and her playmate, Tzhei, and their familiar jokes and superstitious jabbering, such as "did you do the thing?" (did you make love?). To immigrate is to leave one's comfort zone for an unknown destination. It is a cause of anguish.

**Empathy** Understanding the pain of others is a recurring theme in *Fig Tree*. One of the most telling scenes of this theme is when Mina and Eli discover a crippled soldier trying to commit suicide on a riverbank, at the foot of the fig tree that serves as their refuge, but dying at the end of a rope that was cutting off his breath. Mina runs to the soldier's rescue and tries to lift him to allow him to breathe. The soldier refuses to live and pushes the girl away with his last energy, but Mina insists and calls her boyfriend for help. The two teenagers manage to lift the soldier and free the man from the deadly embrace of the cord. Then, they put him on Eli's back, and the boy labors up the rocky slope to the village. Eli collapses at the edge of the village with his strange load, out of breath. A frightened Mina sits the man up, her back against his, feeling the soldier's head rock left and right against the back of her head, listening to his groaning and the irregular rhythm of his gasping, while some children on the village playground run to alert Mina's grandmother and Salitu. The adults arrive and try to understand what could have driven this man to such a desperate act. The grandmother asks him, "What drove you to this act, my child?" She tells him that life is hard, but one must live it. The adults take the soldier home, wash him, find him a bed in the yard, and feed him. The grandmother tells him that she, too, has a grandson who came back disabled from the war. She tells him that while this grandson was away, she was praying to see him again, asking God to bring him back to her, blind or one-armed, but alive. This is to tell the soldier that there is always someone who misses him and prays to see him again. And in the kitchen, as if her back-to-back position with the soldier hadn't allowed her to understand the latter's pain enough, Mina clasps her hands around her neck until she chokes, trying to recognize the hell this man was going through at the end of the rope, trying to put herself in his shoes. This is empathy of the highest order:

## APPEARANCE

**Deception** The program of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries who took power after Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed was one based on correcting the social inequalities of the feudal system that Selassie represented. Thus, one would expect that the new leaders would be attentive to erasing the gap between the haves and the have nots. Yet, As Colonel Mengistu himself acknowledged on TV, only poor

children are kidnapped and sent to war, while rich families with good connections protect their offspring from the war. From this perspective, there is a huge discrepancy between what the political leaders propound and what they do. Their actions do not match their words. They are deceivers of the people. This deception on the highest level of government trickles down to individuals. Hiwet, the smuggler, passes for a philanthrope whose only interest is to help Ethiopian Jews escape from a political system that discriminates against them; in fact, she is an insincere character. She is a money-hungry woman, who strips the desperate people who seek her help. She urges them to leave her their money and belongings, telling them that their money has no value in Israel, and personal property should not be carried because it will be provided upon arrival. Furthermore, Hiwet cannot be trusted to keep her word. She was paid by Mina's grandmother to help fly Eli to Israel with the help of a Jewish family, and were it not for Mina's vigilance, Hiwet would have breached the agreement and kept the money. Mina, too, is an insincere character under the appearance of an innocent sixteen-year-old. However, Mina's insincerity is meant to save the life of her boyfriend and many others of her male classmates who risk being sent to a war from which they are very unlikely to come back safe. Mina tricks her teacher and destroys the attendance sheet that would have permitted the army recruiters to identify the boys in her school and conscript them. Thus, deception and insincerity play at different levels, in pursuit of either purely political/ideological aims or altruistic goals.

#### QUESTIONS

1. In an interview, the filmmaker said that the fig tree in the film was to be a symbol of both normality and war. Explain what you understand by this assertion.
2. In what ways does Mina's grandmother represent women's resilience in time of war?
3. Grandmother Shwai lectures Mina about logical and illogical love. How did you understand her lecture?
4. What do you think of Mina's decision to have sex with Eli in the hope that they can fly together to Israel? Elaborate.
5. Imagine and describe another ending to *Fig Tree*.