

HUMANITY INSTITUTE  
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## 79 (2016)

Tekabe Tediwos

### OVERVIEW

Film *79* is Tekabe Tediwos's first and only feature film to date. It is cast in the ending moments of what was known as the period of the Red Terror in Ethiopia (1976-1978), a moment of violent political repression that followed the coup against Emperor Haile Selassie and the seizure of power by the Mengistu military junta called the Derg. The film casts well-known Ethiopian actors like Selam Tesfaye (Betty) and Girum Ermis (Seyfe).

*Director* Tekabe Tediwos is an Ethiopian film director and graphics designer. There is unfortunately no other information to be found about him beyond this.

*Background* There is also limited information on the film's reception both at home and internationally. Selam Tesfaye was nominated for best actress at the Leza Award in Addis Ababa in 2017 for her role as Betty in *79*, but the award went to another actress.

### CHARACTERS

**Betty** (Selam Tesfaye): The daughter of a businessman, she is forced into a marriage with a Derg commander to keep her father out of jail.

**Seyfe** (Girum Ermias): A ruthless Derg commander, he sends Betty's father to jail to force her to marry him.

**Le'ul** (Natay Getachew): A young mechanic who falls in love with Betty and becomes the target of Seyfe, the Derg commander.

### SYNOPSIS

When Seyfe, a powerful Derg commander, falls in love with Betty, the daughter of Mr. Dagnachew, a successful Ethiopian businessman, he puts the father in jail and confiscates his business. His condition for restoring Mr. Dagnachew to his rights is that the latter should force Betty to marry him. Betty reluctantly accepts to be Seyfe's future wife in order to get her father out of jail. In the meantime, Le'ul, a young graduate from a technical school, arrives in town to take his first job. Betty and he fall in love and start having frequent and secret romantic dates in the woods until news of their escapades comes to Seyfe's ears. To punish Le'ul for seeing his bride-to-be, Seyfe has the young man abducted, tortured, and sent to the frontline to fight as a counterrevolutionary soldier, in the hope that he will be killed. However, Le'ul, who promises Betty that he will come back, survives his ordeal and returns to his girlfriend, who has been faithfully waiting for him. Seyfe's anger soars when he sees the two lovers reunited. He pulls his gun and shoots at Le'ul, but it is Betty who takes the bullet for her lover. Seeing his daughter down, Betty's father shoots at Seyfe, who shoots back. Seyfe and Betty's father kill one another, ending the film.

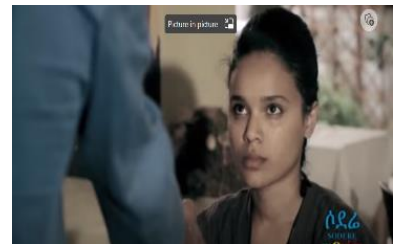
## SCENES

**Ruthless Seyfe** In the same town, a ruthless Derg commander by the name of Seyfe is overseeing the torture of a student leader from whom he wants to extract names of anti-revolution activists. The student swears that he has not the slightest idea who wrote anti-revolutionary graffiti. Seyfe orders his henchmen to break the student's hands.

**The extortionist** Seyfe walks to his office a few steps away from the torture chamber. Mr. Dagnachew, Betty's father, is nervously waiting for him there. Seyfe greets his guest. From Seyfe's office, Betty's father hears the screams of the tortured student and looks afraid. Seyfe asks him where his money is. Mr. Dagnachew hands him an envelope explaining that he could not come up with the full amount because of the poor state of the economy and his business activities slowing down. Seyfe warns him that he expects no less money than the previous times no matter the state of the economy. Seyfe tells Dagnachew that Betty should know nothing of his extortion business.



**A date with Seyfe** Betty's mother scolds her for riding her bike when she should be readying herself for her date with an important man, Seyfe. Betty tells her mother that she does not want to go on that date. Her mother urges her to get ready and not upset such a respectable man as Seyfe. Betty reluctantly complies with her mother demand. Seyfe comes to pick Betty up for a dinner at a restaurant. At the restaurant, the patrons stand up and bow to Seyfe as he passes by. The waiter comes to take Betty's order, but she will not eat anything.



One of Seyfe's friend comes to his table to tease him about how the revolution has been so kind to him with a beauty like Betty. Seyfe is annoyed and dismisses his friend. While eating his meal. Seyfe lectures Betty about the evil of Western imperialism, the benefits of communism, the importance of the revolution, and the necessity for her to join the youth group league in support of the revolution or else be considered an enemy of the revolution. His expression is martial and commanding. A song starts to play in the restaurant. Seyfe's expression becomes softer as he looks at the dancers on the floor. He orders Betty to come and dance with him so that he can show her some dance steps he learned in Russia. He stands up and extends his hand to her. She leaves him standing for long seconds with his hand stretched out. In a whisper he orders her to stand up and dance. She tells him that she is not in the mood to dance. He asks her if she understands to whom she is saying no. She replies that she wants to go home. Seyfe drives Betty home, angry. He stops the car in front of her house, and they remain silent for a while. He then asks her if she is embarrassed of being seen with him. She tells him that that is not what she thought, that she just did not feel like dancing. He tells her that he is a respectable man and will never allow anyone to disrespect him as she did. Betty gets out of Seyfe's car and goes home. Seyfe remains in the car for some time and then drives off.

**Le'ul has a job** Ten years later, in the year 1979 of the Ethiopian calendar, Le'ul, a young graduate of a technical school boards the bus with his mother to a city where he has found his first job as a mechanic. His friend Tamrat comes to bid them farewell. Tamrat urges Le'ul to take good care of his mother and himself.



**Betty notices Le'ul** Le'ul and his mother are going to settle in an old and decrepit shack that Le'ul's late father has bequeathed his mother in the city. As he heads to his new home, Le'ul sees Betty learning to ride a bike, helped by her maid. Betty and Le'ul lock eyes. As Betty passes him, Le'ul turns around to look at her. Betty gets off her bike and watches Le'ul go. Betty's maid notices the girl's interest in the young man and does not seem to like it. Le'ul and his mother settle in their rundown shack in a poor neighborhood. The mother proudly hangs her son's framed diploma on the wall.



**The new job** Le'ul goes to a garage to check in for his first day at work. The mechanic, who does not know that Le'ul is the new worker, starts blabbing about the customer who has just left his garage with a beat-up beetle Volkswagen. The mechanic tells Le'ul that Mr. Dagnachew was a very rich man who today cannot afford a new battery for his car, and who, on top of that, gave his daughter to a beast like Seyfe. Le'ul introduces himself as the new hire from out of town. The garage manager asks him to keep a low profile in this town, and he will not get in trouble.

**Betty falls off her bike** Betty is taking a bicycle riding lesson when she sees Le'ul coming. She wants to impress him and asks her maid to let go of the handlebar. Betty awkwardly rides past Le'ul and runs into a wall. She falls and injures her knee. Le'ul runs to assist her. He takes her to his place to clean her wounds. She surveys his austere house. Her eyes catch his graduation photo on the wall. She jokes about his scared look in the picture. He feigns to be vexed. She thanks him for helping her. He asks her to bring her bike to his garage for him to fix. The following day, Betty's maid brings the bike to Le'ul and warns him to stay away from Betty if he does not want any trouble with Seyfe. The mention of Seyfe gets the attention of Le'ul's manager, who jumps to his feet and asks Le'ul to get as far away from town as possible.



**Le'ul will teach Betty to bike** Le'ul returns Betty's repaired bike to her. She confides in him, saying that the bike is the escape for her imprisoned soul. She tells him that she hopes to be able to ride her bike one day and be as free as a butterfly. Le'ul tells Betty that whatever she goes through, she must not bargain her freedom at any price. He proposes to help her learn to ride her bike. She replies that she must not be seen with any man. He tells her that they can go somewhere where they cannot be seen by anyone, a place she can ride free like a butterfly.

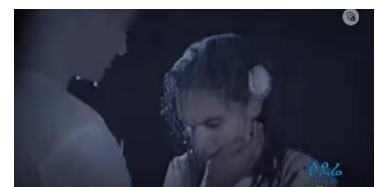


**Secret rendezvous** Over the following days, Betty eludes her maid and goes riding and swimming with Le'ul in a remote park. Seyfe's attempts to see Betty are fruitless. Her maid lies that Betty is sick to avoid Seyfe's wrath. Betty is now a good rider, and she often escapes on her bike to meet Le'ul at their hideout.



**Forced marriage** Le'ul wants to understand how Betty ended up being Seyfe's girlfriend. She explains that Seyfe caught sight of her at her father's restaurant and wanted her. As she refused his advances, he accused her father of getting rich illegally and had him put in jail and confiscated his business and house. He then pressured her father to get her to marry him as the only condition for his freedom. She bent to her father's wishes and accepted Seyfe's demand as the only way to end her family's anguish.

**My soul is imprisoned** Le'ul and Betty are riding home under a thunderstorm. Dagnachew grabs an umbrella and steps outside, to look for his daughter. Le'ul grabs Betty and kisses her, declaring his love for her. She responds with a kiss, telling him that she loves him, too, but that her soul is imprisoned. Just as the two young lovers kiss, a lightning flash reveals their silhouettes to a shocked Dagnachew. Betty sees her father, steps away from Le'ul, and runs into the house.



**Seyfe is angry** Betty's maid discovers that Betty has been meeting Le'ul in secret. She goes to Seyfe to tell him about it. Seyfe's anger soars. He goes to Dagnachew to accuse him of giving him a dog's leftover as a wife. He tells him that his daughter has been running around with a vagabond while she was to stay pure until their marriage. Dagnachew swears that it cannot be Betty, because she is too pure a daughter to misbehave. Seyfe urges Dagnachew to watch for the dog that broke into his house. He leaves Dagnachew shaken and frightened.



**You will marry Seyfe** Dagnachew scolds his daughter for making out with a stranger like a dog while he has been bragging in the neighborhood about her purity. He wants to know who that young man is. Betty tells him that he is her lover. Her answer shocks her mother and the maid, who are standing by. Betty tells her father that she will not marry Seyfe. Her father replies that she has given Seyfe her word and, therefore, will marry him.



Betty gets angry and tells her father that she will not sacrifice her life to a butcher for his sake. She tells him that a father who cares about his daughter would not throw her to a man like Seyfe. Dagnachew slaps Betty, who falls to the ground. The father pulls his belt from his trousers and beats his daughter.

**Le'ul Tortured** On his way home, Le'ul is accosted by Seyfe and his henchmen. They take him to Seyfe's torture chamber and torture him. Seyfe warns Le'ul that Betty is his pure, white dove, who must not mingle with grey doves like him. He tells Le'ul that Betty belongs to him, and that he will let no one take her away from him. Seyfe releases Le'ul, warning him to steer away from Betty unless he no longer wants to live. Later on, soldiers come knocking on Le'ul's door. His frightened mother opens. They go past her and straight to Le'ul. As they drag him away, his mother holds onto him and begs the soldiers to let her son go. One soldier pushes her to the floor. Seeing his mother mistreated, Le'ul fight the soldiers. He is severely beaten. Betty is alerted by a neighbor and comes running to the scene. The soldiers stop her from reaching Le'ul. In a last effort, Le'ul raises his head and asks Betty to look after his mother. Betty is disconsolate. Once again, Le'ul is taken to Seyfe's torture chamber. Seyfe threatens Le'ul. The young man remains defiant and tells him that he is not afraid of him. Seyfe promises Le'ul a slow, painful agony.



**Le'ul is conscripted by force** Seyfe orders his lieutenants to capture every young man fit for military service and force them to enlist. Le'ul and his old friend Tamrat are among the new conscripts. They are to be sent to the battlefield with empty stomachs to fight the anti-revolutionary forces. The soldiers rebel, which hastens their commanders' decision to deploy them to the war front.



**Betty visits Le'ul** The maid intercepts the letters that Le'ul sends to Betty, and she passes them on to Seyfe. Having no news from her boyfriend, Betty manages to find out where Le'ul is. She goes to see him, and he tells her that he will soon be sent to war. She tells him that she is sorry that he is suffering because of her. He asks her not to feel sorry and urges her to continue living her life no matter what happens to him. Nevertheless, he promises her that he will return to her. She promises to wait for him. Betty announces to Le'ul's mother that she has met with her son. She reads the last letter he wrote to her, in which he says that the war is much more atrocious than the romanticized idea that the government feed the people. He tells her of deaths in the trenches and on the battlefield, and of fearful soldiers. He tells her that in all this tragedy, the image of her laughing keeps him going and gives him hope for the future.



**Seyfe courts Betty** Seyfe visits Betty. They sit in his car to talk. He tells her that he does not understand why she is upset with him. He asks that they marry as soon as possible. He says that he has already discussed the date of the wedding with her father. He offers Betty a necklace, which he puts around her neck. Betty removes the necklace and gives it back to him, saying that her neck will never be bedecked with his jewelry. She then opens the car door and leaves. Le'ul is wounded on the battlefield and left for dead. His mother dies in her bed holding his graduation picture against her chest. Betty's father urges her to forget about Le'ul and start thinking about her future with Seyfe, a man of valor. Betty's mother, too, pleads with her daughter to marry Seyfe and have a respectable life. Betty remains inflexible.

**Seyfe wants a sumptuous wedding** Seyfe summons Betty's father. He wants his wedding with Betty to take place on the first day after the Ethiopian new year. He asks Mr. Dagnachew to organize a sumptuous wedding because he intends to have many government officials at this wedding. On the eve of his wedding, Seyfe is celebrating his upcoming marriage with his friends. He tells them that a grey dove tried to steal his pure white dove, but he sent him to a place from where he will never return. Seyfe tells his friends that no one, no even God, can take what belongs to him. Betty is eavesdropping and confronts him in front of his friends, telling him that she will never be his wife. Seyfe is furious. He beats her and tells her that she is his wife, and that her boyfriend is dead and will never return.



**Le'ul is back** Betty goes to her room, makes a mixture of fatal medication, and prepares to take her life. As she is about to drink the poison, her little sister opens the door, out of breath, and points beyond the garden saying Le'ul's name. Betty runs out, Le'ul comes towards her and they throw themselves into each other's arms.



**Seyfe orders Le'ul's death** Betty and Le'ul prepare to elope on the day of Betty's wedding with Seyfe. Betty's mother discovers a note telling her that she will not be marrying Seyfe. Mr. Dagnachew laments to his wife that his daughter has dishonored him and takes his gun, determined to kill Le'ul. As Le'ul prepares to meet Betty at the train station, he is kidnapped by Seyfe's men. Seyfe orders his henchmen not to let Le'ul get out of the torture room alive. Betty arrives at the train station, but Le'ul is nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, Tamrat, who has followed Le'ul's abductors, fetches his gun and kills them as they are torturing his friend. Tamrat rescues Le'ul, who runs to the station to meet Betty. Seyfe has preceded Le'ul at the station and tells Betty that Le'ul will not be coming and urges her to hurry and get home because they have a wedding to celebrate. Le'ul shows up and stands by Betty, defiantly telling Seyfe that Betty will be leaving with him. Seyfe is furious.

**The shootout** Le'ul tells Seyfe that all his efforts to separate Betty and him have been defeated. He asks Seyfe to get out of their way and let them be. Seyfe pulls his gun and points it at Le'ul, vowing not to let him take Betty away from him. Seyfe calls Betty over. She tells him that she can never love him, and that it is Le'ul that she loves with all her heart. Seyfe shoots at Le'ul, but Betty shields him and takes the bullet. As she falls, Betty's father, who has just arrived, shoots at Seyfe. Seyfe returns fire, and in the shootout Mr. Dagnachew and Seyfe collapse, dead. A grieving Le'ul holds Betty in his arms.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Betty** Betty is a principled and loyal girl, trapped in the imperatives of a masculinist society. She cannot freely be with the man she loves. The shibboleth of a good girl decrees that she accept the man her father has chosen for her even if that man is a monster.

**Trapped** Betty is a girl trapped in the desire of her authoritarian father. Her life is determined by Mr. Dagnachew, who demands that she marry a man she despises, Seyfe. She says it well when Le'ul starts showing some romantic interest in her, that 'her soul is imprisoned'. She decorates her room, her curtains, her bed sheets, and her bike with images of butterflies, creatures that symbolize for her what she lacks the most, flight and freedom.

*Principled* Betty decided that she will never be the wife of Seyfe, a brutal man who disgusts her. Pressures from her parents and threats from Seyfe do not make her bend. Stoic, she prefers the noble poverty of Leul over Seyfe's money drawn from illegal activities.

*Loyal/optimistic* Le'ul promised Betty that nothing would separate them. And Betty always remained optimistic that Le'ul would come back to her no matter what obstacles stood in his way. When her mother told her that she should forget Le'ul because no one ever returned from where he was sent, Betty simply replied that Le'ul promised her that he would come back. She waited, and her optimism paid off. Unfortunately, Seyfe cut her life short with a bullet the day she was to leave town with Le'ul.

**Le'ul** Le'ul is a supportive, courageous, and resilient young man. Riding a bike means freedom to Betty, so he teaches her how to ride. He infuses strength in Betty by his determination to stand up to the brutal Derg commander. He is put through the most difficult test by Seyfe but always comes through victorious.

*Supportive* Leul is a supportive man. He falls in love with Betty and very quickly understands that she is an imprisoned soul held captive by the most feared man in town. He stands by her and promises her, against winds and tides, to help her fly free like a butterfly. Seyfe's intimidation and brutal methods do not deter him. He remains steadfast and gives Betty the strength to say no to both Seyfe and her abusive father.

*Courageous* "You have tried everything you can to separate us, and you failed. Now, get out of our way and let us live our lives." These are the words that Le'ul says to the most feared man in town. Seyfe has never imagined that anyone would talk to him this way, and Le'ul's courage and defiance make Seyfe lose control and pull his gun.

*Resilient* From the time Seyfe learns that Le'ul was seeing Betty, he promises to make Le'ul's life unbearable, and he does. Le'ul is beaten by Seyfe's soldiers. He goes through two torture sessions at the hands of Seyfe's henchmen. He is sent to the most unforgiving battleground and is wounded there and left for dead. Nevertheless, Le'ul survives his ordeal and returns to reunite with Betty.

**Seyfe** Seyfe is an abusive and chauvinistic man. To Betty's father he is an extortionist and blackmailer. To Betty and Betty's lover, Seyfe is a brutal, abusive man. He uses his official position to terrorize his victims.

*Abusive* Seyfe abuses the power of his position. He puts Betty's father in jail to pressure him to convince his daughter to marry him. He extorts money from Betty's father and threatens him with reprisals if he mentions it to his daughter. He tortures students to extract false confessions from them. He has Le'ul kidnapped and tortured for his relationship with Betty. And, at the end, he uses his gun to resolve his personal conflict with Le'ul.

*Chauvinistic* Seyfe considers Betty to be his property. He tells people that she is his pure white dove, which a grey pigeon (Le'ul) wants to lead astray. He tells his friends that the thing (Betty) belongs to him, and that no one, not even God, can take it away from him. In his chauvinistic perception, Betty is his mere property to dispose of as he wishes.

**Mr. Dagnachew (Betty's father)** Mr. Dagnachew is a cowardly man who uses his daughter to shield himself from Seyfe's wrath. He feels remorseful at the end, but it is too late. His weakness and lack of affection cause his daughter's death.

*Uncaring* Mr. Dagnachew shows little affection to his daughter, Betty. When, at the age of six, she was saved from drowning, he scolded her rather than comforted her. He is inflexible in his stand that Betty must marry Seyfe. His livelihood depends on it, and he hates Le'ul, his daughter's lover, for making Betty think otherwise, instead of being happy for her. In fact, he is coming to shoot Betty's lover when he sees his daughter take a bullet from Seyfe's gun that was destined for Le'ul. The only gesture of affection he shows Betty is when they both are dying and he tries to reach her. This moment comes too late.

*Cowardly* Unlike fathers who would give their lives for their children, Mr. Dagnachew cowardly uses his daughter as a shield to protect himself from Seyfe's reprisals. He forces Betty to marry Seyfe to get himself out of prison and to recover his confiscated properties, not caring at all about his daughter's happiness. And when she reminds him that she, too, yearns for happiness and true love, he beats her in order that she submit to his orders.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**Class/education** 79 tackles the theme of class from the onset. Le'ul is a young man from a poor social background. When his father passed away, the only inheritance his mother and he were bequeathed was a run-down shack in the poorest quarter of a town controlled by a ruthless commander, Seyfe. There, Le'ul met Betty, the daughter of a once-rich businessman, who, although dispossessed by Seyfe, was still living in one of the richest neighborhoods of the town and could afford his own impressive house. Le'ul's path crossed with Betty's only because Le'ul's education landed him a job in Betty's neighborhood, making it possible for the two young people to notice each other and to start a love relation. Here, as with several other Ethiopian films, such as *Difret* (2014), *Lamb* (2015), and *Embi* (2018), the film-maker seems to emphasize the importance of education as a factor of change and a bridge between social classes. With his degree in hand and a new job lined up for him, Le'ul was confident that he could change his family's living condition, and he promised that to his mother. Unfortunately, Le'ul's education went to waste when he was recruited by force by a jealous commander and sent to war.

**Marriage** In a patriarchal society such as the one featured in 79, marriage is not always based on love. The reverence girls have for their fathers, and their obligation to preserve their fathers' honor through respect and submission, can often cause them to bypass their happiness to satisfy paternal/ familial injunctions. Betty is compelled by her father to marry Seyfe, his jailor, to get him out of jail even before Betty has a chance to meet someone of her choosing and fall in love. The girl gives her father her word but lives unhappily. This is until Le'ul shows up, and she falls in love with him. At this point, Betty is torn between her individual needs and her family's expectations. She chooses to follow her heart and promises herself to Le'ul, which unleashes violence on her and her boyfriend. All the intimidation and bullying fail to kill the two young people's resolve to be together. They live through tribulations, and as they find each other, Betty takes a bullet from Seyfe, which is intended for her lover.

**Objectification** From the beginning, Betty's existence was put on hold to satisfy a higher cause, her father's honor. Mr. Dagnachew, her father, was imprisoned by Commander Seyfe and his properties confiscated because Betty would not accept Seyfe's advances. So, Betty was forced to accept Seyfe's marriage proposal in order to restore her father to his social status. Betty was, thus, a mere commodity, an exchange currency in a transaction between her father and Seyfe. Betty's opinion mattered little. The men (her father and Seyfe) have taken it upon themselves to think on her behalf, presuming that they know what is best for her. In fact, both her father and Seyfe made it clear that she had no say as to whether she wanted to get married to Seyfe. Seyfe wanted it, and her father ordered her to comply, and that was that. And when she dared rebel against her father's decision and denounced him for being insensitive and ignoring her feelings, he slapped and whipped her for voicing a contradictory opinion.

### POLITICS

**Abuse of power** Fathers are held in high regard in Ethiopian society, but Mr. Dagnachew is an abusive father. He is aware of the respect his daughter has towards him, and uses it to bail himself out of jail and to recover his lost assets by forcing her into a marriage with Commander Seyfe. The commander, who came to prominence upon the 1974 military coup d'état against Emperor Haile Selassie, uses the program of the Marxist-Leninist junta to his advantage. In fact, the junta has declared the nationalization of private enterprises, and to pressure Mr. Dagnachew into giving him his daughter in marriage, Seyfe puts Betty's father's businesses on the list of companies to be nationalized and imprisons him under the pretext that Mr. Dagnachew has enriched himself illegally. Mr. Dagnachew is freed from jail and his properties returned only after his daughter, who had previously refused the advances of Seyfe, agrees to marry him. This proves that for Seyfe, the nationalization program has no ideological basis and is instead motivated by personal interests. When Seyfe learns that a young man in town (Le'ul) is seeing his bride-to-be, he has Le'ul arrested and tortured. Seyfe's power is for the preservation of his personal interests. To preserve these interests, to protect them against armed anti-revolutionary movements that threaten to end the regime that makes him powerful, Seyfe orders his military strategists to forcefully recruit all capable young men and send them to fight the insurgents. To make Le'ul pay for daring to date the woman he wants to marry (Betty), Seyfe has him enrolled and sent to the battlefield, hoping that he will die there. When Le'ul survives the ordeal and comes back, Seyfe decides to kill him by his own hand. He shoots at Le'ul, but Betty protects

her boyfriend and takes the bullet and dies. Betty's father shoots at Seyfe and kills him, thus ending his reign of terror and abuse.

**Politics** 79 is to be understood in the context of the political situation that prevailed in Ethiopia in 1979. Indeed, between 1974 and 1987, a military junta with a Marxist-Leninist ideology ruled the country following the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie. The junta then split in several factions with competing interests and started a bloody internal war. The civilians, either rightly or wrongly, suspected of spying for one or the other of the battling sides, got caught in these internal conflicts. The Mengistu regime, which by 1977 was able to consolidate its power against the other groups, declared "death to the counter-revolutionaries" and engaged in wide-range abuses. It is estimated today that around 900,000 people died of atrocities committed by the Mengistu regime. When Le'ul arrives in town and shows up for his first job as a mechanic, his manager asks him to keep a low profile if he wants to live longer. It is a gloomy warning against Mengistu's men, and especially Seyfe, who was known for using his political power to bully his way around. Le'ul locked eyes with Betty, a girl pursued by Seyfe, and the young man was soon at the receiving end of Seyfe's brutal methods.

**War** 79 denounces the absurdity of war, and especially how war depletes human capital in a country when it pits the children of that country against one another. Le'ul best describes war's waste in a letter he writes to his mother from the front line, and which Betty reads to the old woman. He writes: "We lose many of our friends every day. We are losing hope. All I see is darkness." He deplores the fact that sons from the same nation are forced to aim and shoot at one another in the name of some ideological principles they hardly understand, and which do not, after all, improve the people's daily conditions. Le'ul epitomizes a generation sacrificed in the name of politics and ideology. An educated young man from a poor family, who had the opportunity to use his skills to lift his family out of poverty, he finds himself wasting his intellectual potential in the trenches of an atrocious war manufactured by political operatives. In the meantime, his poor mother, to whom he had enthusiastically promised a better life, and who was so proud of her son's accomplishments and so hopeful in the future, withers away in indigence, with no consolation, and dies before he can return to her.

## RELATIONSHIP

**Loyalty** Betty was raised in a family that values loyalty, especially loyalty to one's parents. Her father, who was dispossessed of his business and house and imprisoned by Seyfe, needed Betty to bail him out by marrying Seyfe. Although she felt only disgust for Seyfe, she agreed to marry him so that her father could be free and recover his properties. So, Betty became Seyfe's fiancée while waiting for the wedding date to be decided. However, Betty was in love with Le'ul. And to him, she vowed loyalty. Betty's loyalty vow to Le'ul was personal and sincere, not institutional, familial, or perfunctory like the loyalty automatically expected of her because of her belonging to a family or a culture. While Betty's effort to satisfy her family loyalty was forced, her determination to remain loyal to Le'ul was spontaneous. She was ready to put her life at stake for her boyfriend, and she did just that. In order to meet Le'ul, she defied the authority of a man she called a butcher (Seyfe), and whose atrocities the whole town feared. She confronted her father and told him that he was selfish in selling her to Seyfe. She took the risk of meeting Le'ul in his barracks, and she waited for him when he was sent by Seyfe to the battlefield. And when Le'ul came back and she reunited with him, and a jealous Seyfe tried to kill him, she took the bullet in his place.

**Betrayal** Mr. Dagnachew betrayed his paternal duty by delivering his daughter to Seyfe in order to save himself from jail and recover his confiscated business and house. A father owes protection to his children, and Mr. Dagnachew failed in that duty when he put his own well-being above his daughter's. Betty denounced her father's dereliction of his paternal duty when she told him that a real father would not have sacrificed his daughter as he did. Instead of feeling sorry for his action, Dagnachew whips his daughter for condemning him, further demonstrating his betrayal of loyalty to his daughter and his failure to be her protector. Betty's maid, too, betrayed her. She told Seyfe about Betty's and Le'ul's secret meetings, which put Seyfe's henchmen on Le'ul's trail and led to his torture. Later, when Le'ul was enrolled by force and sent to the battlefield, Betty's maid intercepted letters that the young man sent to his girlfriend, and she gleefully passed them on to Seyfe.



## Questions

1. What symbolism do you see in the scene of six-year-old Betty standing on a rock in the middle of rising tides?
2. Seyfe confesses that he did not give much to Betty's maid for her to betray Betty. What then do you think are the true motivations for the maid's betrayal of Betty?
3. What is your interpretation of the respective deaths of Betty, Seyfe, and Dagnachew?
4. What is the filmmaker's intention in making Le'ul the sole survivor in the shootout that killed the other three main protagonists?
5. In *Fig Tree* (2018), another Ethiopian film, a grandmother tells her granddaughter that love has its logic, and that one must choose whom to love, and that one cannot love whomever just because one is in love. In view of the responsibilities that Le'ul had towards his mother, do you think he behaved selfishly and did not listen to this logic of love? Explain your answer.