

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

## Kidist Yilma

**LIFE** **Kidist Yilma** is an Ethiopian-born film director and writer. She is married to actor Amanuel Habtamu, whom she cast in several of her movies. She lives and works in Ethiopia. There is no information about Yilma's year of birth, and very little other information is available concerning her life.

### ACHIEVEMENT

Kidist Yilma is among Ethiopia's most prolific and successful directors. She has directed five features: *Rebuni* (2014), *Meba* (2015), *Keletat* (2016), *Taza* (2017), and *Doka* (2023). The success of Yilma's features, coupled with the blossoming of new Amharic-language TV stations in Ethiopia in the mid-2000, has prompted Yilma to start producing TV content. Yilma's *Rebuni* won Ethiopia's most prized award, the Gumma, as well as Best Feature Film and Best Audience Choice awards at the country's annual film festival. For that same film, Yilma also won Best Director and Screenplay. The lead actress of the film, Ruta Mengisteab, was awarded Best Female Actress of the year. Yeabsira Tekilu, who played Abule, won Best Promising Child Actor Award.

### FILMOGRAPHY

*Doka* (2023)

*Taza* (2017)

*Keletat* (2016)

*Meba* (2015)

*Rebuni* (2014)



## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**Class:** The question of class is at the center of Yilma's *Rebuni*. The filmmaker stresses the dichotomy between the rural class, of which Adey and her family are the representatives, and the urban class, represented by Leul. Yilma's intent in this film is to show that the pejorative and complimentary images associated, respectively, with the rural class and the urban class are wrong. Urbanites are not richer or more sophisticated than country people. The latter live on extended natural stretches of land that are coveted by the former, and they also have an ecological appreciation of their environment that is lacking in city folks. The urbanites' sense of superiority is excessively inflated and comes from societal appreciation of things of superficial value.

*Rebuni:* Leul and Adey represent two different social classes. Indeed, when Leul's wife, Ribka, catches him with his head in Adey's lap and suspects them of having a romantic relationship, it is by referring to Adey's lower social class that she intends to have her revenge. Ribka tells Adey that a woman like her, who cannot afford the luxury of properly taking care of her hair, does not deserve a man like Leul. She then turns on her husband, asking him how a man like him, who cannot even bear to wear clothes that are not ironed, can stoop so low as to find himself lying on the grass with an unkept girl like Adey. Indeed, Leul is an affluent businessman who lives with his wife in a large house in one of Addis Ababa's upscale neighborhoods, while Adey lives with her extended family on a farm just outside the city. Yet, what one sees is far from the total reality: Adey's poverty and Leul's wealth are only superficial. Adey is the proud owner of an ancestral land that attracts investors like Leul. Unlike Leul, Adey's priorities are not the frantic pursuit of dividends. The land on which she celebrates traditional rituals with her family, and which brings them together every evening around a common dish, provides her with all the wealth she can dream of. Leul, on the other hand, will only feel fulfilled when he has accumulated wealth. Of the two protagonists, it seems that it is Leul, the eternally dissatisfied, the eternally thirsty for wealth, who is poor, and that it is Adey, the satisfied, who is rich. However, in the value grid of the capitalist society that has cast a pall over Ethiopia and denatured man, values are reversed. The unfortunate one who has been alienated from his nature by the "progress" of social life is elevated to the upper class, while the one who has attained an understanding of the world around her, and lives in perfect symbiosis with it, is demeaned. Adey's struggle to teach Leul the importance of preserving what is natural in him has a political dimension: it implies fighting a political system in which the decision-makers have sided with unbridled capitalism and its values.

**Development:** *Rebuni* is an account of what affirmative development should look like. Yilma seems to be telling her audience that a development agenda that does not put humanity's wellbeing at its center fails to be pertinent. She contrasts Adey's humble, but laudable, purpose of putting her land at the service of healing with Leul's money-focused objective of transforming a pristine reserve into a polluting paint factory complex. The dialectics that Yilma creates by contrasting Adey's humanist mission with Leul's capitalistic undertaking gets resolved when Adey gradually infuses into Leul her values of naturalism, humility, and empathy.

*Rebuni:* Leul wants to buy Adey's land to build his new paint factory. He tells her that it is the duty of every Ethiopian to contribute to their country's development, and that her best contribution is to sell him her land. Adey replies that his arguments are quite enticing, but before she makes the contribution Leul is asking, she wants him to detail in a proposal the pros and cons of building his factory on her land. Leul keeps returning to Adey without the proposal, and she keeps insisting that she cannot give him a definitive answer unless he produces it. While Leul procrastinates on the proposal, his recurrent visits to Adey bring him, little by little closer to her, and she takes him through the natural setting of her land. What Adey wants Leul to grasp, as she leads him through colorful open fields, thick forests, and brooks, are the qualitative differences between his conception of development and hers. Without openly criticizing Leul's capitalistic, money-driven approach to development, Adey shows him how the yields of her land are at the service of human wellbeing. She shows him the healing plants and roots that thrive on her land, and which can be obtained for free, but which capitalist pharmaceutical companies recondition, package in the West and sell back to Ethiopians at exorbitant costs. One time, as Leul is going on a trip, she asks him to bring her a bottle of natural medicine when he comes back. Leul gives Adey the gift, but she looks at it and throws it away, laughing. When he inquires why, she tells him that this sought-after medicine is processed from a

tree called *Shiferaw*, which grows abundantly on her land. Leul did not know that. The progress of social life has alienated him from his natural environment.

Leul's encounter with Adey is for him also a moment of self-development. Adey teaches him to return to his moment of childhood, to learn to be a man by avoiding further denaturation. At one point, as Leul disdainfully hands Adey a tiny bottle of sanitizer for her to disinfect her hands before helping herself with some snacks, Adey dismisses his offer and picks some leaves from a shrub nearby, which she crushes and rubs in her palm. She then tells Leul that it is a powerful natural disinfectant scientifically proven by an Ethiopian researcher to kill the deadliest of germs. As Leul visits Adey more often and gets to understand the importance of the land to the wellbeing of the people who benefit from its yield, he loses interest in buying the land for his factory. He does not even talk about it any longer. When Adey finally tells him that she does not intend to sell him her land, Leul has already reached the conclusion that a factory on that land will be a great ecological disaster. In fact, Leul has even lost interest in his job, as he confides in his friend and assistant, Aman. He also tells his wife that she can have everything, all their assets. Leul realizes that true development is the one that puts humans in touch with nature and develops the natural goodness of humans, not the one that makes humanity a slave to profit.

**Tradition:** Two of the missions Yilma gave herself in *Rebuni* is, first, the celebration and, second, the preservation of Ethiopian tradition. In a society undergoing the onslaught of unbridled capitalism and modernity, such an undertaking is a work of activism and resistance. Adey is Yilma's spokesperson in that mission. She carries her torch of Ethiopian tradition against the destabilizing forces of modernism, represented by Leul. At the end of the film, tradition emerges victorious from a battle it has waged with patience and self-sacrifice against an impetuous, impatient and arrogant modernism.

*Rebuni* It is a film that celebrates tradition against the fast takeover of ancestral values by modernity. Leul symbolizes the educated, modern Ethiopian who has moved away from traditional values and closer to Western values, thus losing his true essence. In contrast, Adey, the fledgling matriarch of a traditional, extended family, represents what is still left in Ethiopian values that is resisting the assault of modernism. Leul comes to Adey as an agent of Western, capitalistic enterprise with his profit-driven mentality to buy and transform one of the last pristine lands on the outskirts of the expanding city of Addis Ababa. He comes to her with an arrogant, superior attitude, convinced that she cannot turn down his offer, especially as he asks her to name her price. For him, everything has a price. But Leul is surprised and frustrated at Adey's reticence to sell her land and at her demand that he write her a detailed proposal of how what he intends to do with her land benefits humanity. As Leul keeps returning to Adey, hoping to persuade her, she teaches him about how the land on which she lives with her family is a repository of precious Ethiopian values. The young woman teaches him about being mental and emotional grounded (literally). Leul lives the turbulent life of a workaholic, which affects his family life. His wife feels neglected and wants a divorce. With Adey, Leul learns to turn off his phone and appreciate some moments of tranquility in nature. By so doing, Leul reconnects with his natural sense of freedom and independence and slowly steers away from his previous belief that freedom is only attainable through wealth accumulation. In fact, Leul sees how Adey and her family are happy with so few material things. Adey's and Abule's practical jokes on Leul, though they upset him at first, teach him to have a sense of humor and to not take himself too seriously. Abule pushes him into a muddy ravine and gets his white business shirt dirty. Abule covers Leul's car with cow manure. But Adey also gets Leul to remove his shirt and wash himself in a stream, and she forces her little brother to apologize to Leul. In his contact with Adey, Leul undergoes a metamorphosis. He comes out of his authoritarian and rigid shell and apologizes to Aman, his assistant, for the way he treats him. Leul also apologizes to his wife for not being always present when she needs him, and he decides to leave her all their assets and retire, probably in the company of Adey. At this point, Leul does not know that Adey is dying of a cancer, and that she will die a few weeks later.

**Collectivism vs individualism:** The clash of tradition and modernism is also that of collectivism versus individualism. These two forces are represented, respectively, by Adey's rural space and Leul's urban space. The metaphors for these two spaces are numerous in *Rebuni*. On the one hand, there is the economy of the meal, of sharing, of celebration, of the extended family. And, on the other hand, there is the economy of the nuclear family, of competition, and of infatuation with the accumulation of personal wealth.

*Rebuni* Yilma's juxtaposition of scenes of Leul and his wife eating at a restaurant, on one side, and Adey, her brother, her father, her grandmother, and her grandfather sharing a meal around a common plate and feeding each other, on the other side, is telling. It symbolizes the contrast between the individualism of profit-driven city folk and the collectivism of people-caring country folk. Adey and her family live in the last entrenchments of a rural area that the city is about to swallow. Their land is desired by covetous developers like Leul, who want to implant one symbol of capitalism on it: a car paint factory. However, the family resist and make their prized land the last bastion of disappearing collectivist rituals. There, the land yields its precious medicinal plants and roots for the wellbeing of all. There, in Adey's grandfather's clinic, the poor are treated for free with the techniques of traditional medicine. There, Adey is treated by her grandfather and comforted with prayers. There, Adey gathers the schoolchildren of the village and organizes games for them and rewards their effort. There, Adey's extended family share the same compound and eat every meal together, from the same dish. In their huge city villa, by contrast, Leul and his wife are bickering and threatening to separate over money and lack of children, while in Adey's family, what belongs to one belongs to all, and it would be unnecessary to fight over the common property, for it belongs to no one in particular. Freed from the stress of unhealthy competition, Adey's family is happy and can only worry about the inevitable, such as death, which snatches away their loved ones. Leul, the impenitent capitalist, who used to think that money was the solution to everything, learns from Adey to detach himself from the ideal of wealth accumulation. He surprises his wife when he tells her that he surrenders to her everything and leaves to start another life. Leul, who does not know that Adey is dying of cancer, is certainly thinking of living an austere life with her, on her land. However, a week before her death, Adey urges Leul to reconcile with his wife, which he does after Adey dies.

**Education:** Yilma's films celebrate the transformative value of education. Education lifts people out of ignorance and opens doors to emancipation. That is why the characters in *Keletat*, for example, fight to remove all obstacles to their education. For Yilma, however, the kind of education one receives is of paramount importance. In *Rebuni*, Yilma emphasizes the quality of education, contrasting Adey's education with that received by Leul. The former places people at the service of other people, while the latter makes people selfish and leads them to focus, exclusively, on their personal pleasures.

Abule The story starts like another Ethiopian film, *Difret* (2014). It is the end of the school year, and students get their report cards from their teachers. They wave them in the air and jump and sing, and enthusiastically run home to show their progress to their parents. The children's enthusiasm to share their school results with their parents denotes the importance that both parents and children place on education. Abule is eager to share his report card with his favorite person in the compound. He runs past his father, towards his sister in the field, rolling down and climbing the hills, like a new recruit on an obstacle course. He is proud to show her any little progress he made this year. He is ranked 42 out of 46 students, but for him, it is a huge accomplishment. His sister, Adey, first scoffs and teases him about still being behind, but then hugs him and congratulates him, telling him that she is very proud of him. He tells her that he is proud of himself, too, and promises that he will do even better next year. She then urges him to go show his report card to his grandfather. Adey has dropped out of university because she is dying of cancer. Her little brother, who does not know about her disease, teases her that she has been kicked out of school. She keeps telling him that she is just taking a break and that she will return to her studies the next semester. And she tells him that she will get her degree. They bet on that and on Abule getting his university degree, too. Here, Adey wants to impress upon her brother the importance of formal education. Yet, in the fields, Abule has been receiving an education in harmony with his natural development as a child.

This natural education will only make a complete man of Abule if it is coupled with formal education; thus, his relatives' insistence on the importance of formal education. It is the symbiosis of the two educations that will make Abule a citizen grounded in his natural dispositions and at the service of his fellow country men and women.

Leul: This is not the case with Leul. Leul has received only formal education. He has become successful in material wealth accumulation. However, his lack of natural education has alienated him from nature, from his inner natural self, and from being a man at the service of society; thus, giving him a crooked notion of development, a development not at the service of humanity but for the destruction of humanity and its environment. *Rebuni* suggests that Leul is still salvageable; he just needs reformation through natural education.

Adey In that teaching, Adey becomes Leul's teacher. Leul is germophobe. He will never sit on the grass, shake people's hand, or dip in the same dish as others. He walks around with a bottle of sanitizer in his pocket. In other words, Leul is afraid of nature. Adey teaches him that nature is friendly and not hostile, that it is replete with remedies and not diseases. She teaches him about the plants on her land and their curative virtues. She makes him sit on the grass, lie down and relax. With Adey, Leul learns to put away his cell phone and stop trying to make a business deal at all time. He learns to apologize to his assistant, whom he has been bullying. He learns to apologize to his wife. He becomes less profit-driven. He becomes a man at the service of other men and women and not just at the service of money. At the end of the film, Leul walks away, holding Abule's hand. They both will have something to teach each other to perfect one another.

*Keletat* Like many Ethiopian films, *Keletat* stresses the importance of education as a means of social mobility. Semeret's father's pride when he sees his daughter's diploma is justified. He understands that by going to university, his daughter has passed one milestone towards changing her living condition and pulling the family to a higher status. Inversely, Mr. Girma's consternation when he learns of his unmarried daughter's pregnancy is explicable by the fact that it throws a monkey wrench in the works of individual and familial social uplift. Culturally, an unmarried mother is a victimizer. She damages the family's standing in the community. Socially, she is a victim, for raising her child without the support of a husband consumes most of her time, and thus gives her little or no opportunity to pursue her studies, which maintains her in a state of subalternity. Semeret gives her newborn away and, by so doing, frees herself from the heavy burden of having to be responsible for a child, devoting, instead, all her energy to the pursuit of her studies. Semeret goes on to become a powerful woman in the country. As for Bruktawit, who was among the best students of her high school class, her dedication to her child stops her in her educational tracks. And it is ironic that when Besufikad, the child to whom she dedicated her life, looks for a model of success, it is to Semeret, the mother that gave him away, that he turns, as he tells her repeatedly that he, too, will one day earn his diploma with distinction, like her, the educated mother.

**Environment:** Modernism's assault on human society often has the unfortunate consequence of making the environment the collateral victim of capitalism. Yilma's first feature film, *Rebuni*, shows that true development is the development that respects and protects the environment. With this in mind, the film's main character succeeds not only in dissuading capitalists from buying and transforming her land into a polluting factory, but also in bringing these capitalists back to an ecological appreciation of their environment.

*Rebuni* Leul makes a proposition to Adey that he believes is in the best interests of Ethiopia: he wants to buy her land to build a paint factory. Moreover, Leul, who has the backing of the government, argues that Adey should join in, as this would be her patriotic contribution to the national cause. Before she can sell him her land, Adey wants Leul to show her a proposal that explains how a chemical factory is better than a land that produces medicine. Leul is reluctant to produce that proposal. Therefore, Adey sets about to show him the evidence, through a hands-on approach, that the factory pollutes while the land heals. One ought to be preserved and the effects of the other limited. Adey demonstrates to Leul that the things he values, such as pills and sanitizers, which are brought from abroad at high costs, are abundantly available on her land. One only has to preserve and protect the land to make these products sustainable for the wellbeing of the population.

It is not just what one finds on Adey's land that makes it so unique. It is also, and above all, how the land makes one feel. The setting of Adey's land is emotionally therapeutic, as Leul will discover. She shows him the beauty of her land and its benefits. It is a place that appeals to the senses and conveys tranquility and peace of mind. In a shaded, restful area, far removed from the agitations and noises of the city, Adey asks Leul to turn off his phone, lie his head in her lap, close his eyes, and forget his worries. Soon, Leul falls asleep, lulled by the birdsongs, the whisper of the breeze in the foliage, and the murmur of the stream in the ravines. Leul falls in love with the land not as an ideal place to build his paint factory but as a pristine repository to be preserved. He is no longer interested in buying it for his factory.

## RELATIONSHIPS

### Love:

In her films, Yilma explores various aspects of love. In *Rebuni* and *Taza*, she shows the romantic feelings that develop between two individuals, leading them to promise to look in the same direction. In *Taza*, where a conflict pits sons and daughters of the same country against each other, Yilma also suggests that love of neighbor is the solution to greater dilemmas, such as hatred and war. This love of others stands in contrast to the egocentric love of self, which, in *Keletat*, for instance, leads the film's main protagonist to put her desire for personal success above all else, to the point of getting rid of her newborn child by abandoning it in a cemetery. However, love can also be altruistic, insofar as it has as its object the edification of the other. It is again in *Keletat* that Yilma dramatizes this form of love, when one of the film's characters sacrifices her studies to care for and raise an abandoned child. In *Taza*, another kind of love, which is neither centered on self nor on the other but on flag and country, is oblivious of others' sentiments and disruptive to their wellbeing.

*Rebuni* This film is part of the romance trend in Ethiopian cinema. The friendship between Adey and Leul transforms over time into a mutual romantic attraction. Adey's childish mannerisms, her jokes, which previously irritated Leul, begin to amuse him. Leul even takes pleasure in seeing Adey sneak into his office unannounced and interrupt a business meeting. The spontaneity of the young woman, the frankness of her feelings, begins to get the better of Leul's rigidity, starts to crack his shell of conventionalism. Under the pretext of coming to discuss the purchase of her land, Leul increases his visits to Adey. They take little walks; she holds his hands to lead him across a brook; they choose a romantic, shaded area in the woods, where he rests his head in her lap and dozes off while she strokes his head. This mutual attraction between Leul and Adey is, nonetheless, not of the order of the classic, passionate love. In fact, what Adey teaches Leul is more to love his wife than to love her. She asks Leul, who is undergoing some marital trouble, to reconcile with his wife. At one point, Leul's wife catches him with his head in Adey's lap, and she derides Adey and her family for being low-class people who do not deserve to be with her husband. Upon Adey's death, after Leul reconciles with his wife, she asks him if he started hating her after he met Adey. Leul tells her that it is, in fact, after meeting Adey, that he learned to love her. He tells her that it is Adey who taught him what love is.

*Taza* Love, Abraham's mother says, can conquer all and is the only solution to war: if only the decision-makers could listen to love, they would be softened. Likewise, in the letter she writes to Abraham when he decides to go to the battlefield, Selam tells him that if he will be honest and look within himself, he will know that he loves her and stay for her. Eschu, Selam's electrician friend, is also in love with her but too shy to tell her, and Selam is not able to decode the subtle gestures of affection that he sends her. Heartbroken by his country and by Selam, Eschu decides to volunteer for the battlefield. Thus, love goes unnoticed by the protagonists, either because they refuse to let their guard down and allow themselves to be caught up in feelings that would reveal them to the world as weak characters—as in the case of the decision-makers and Abraham - or because the characters lack the perception to sense it—as in the case of Selam, who fails to detect Eschu's romantic feelings for her. However, when love is fully accepted and lived, it leads to freedom from the superficial constraints of society. The brief moment when Abraham gives free rein to his feelings and allows himself to be conquered by his love for Selam, he becomes less rigid and more personable. He lies down with her in the grass and promises to protect her.

**Love of ideal** On closer inspection, the objects of Abraham's and Selam's respective loves appear different. Indeed, Abraham seems to have centered his love on an ideal, that of the fatherland, the nation, and the flag—these different terms amounting to the same thing for him. When he is told that he is free, Abraham cannot leave his cell until he has paid homage to the flag and the national anthem. When Selam drunkenly taunts him by singing the national anthem, Abraham, though irritated, cannot react, and stands as straight as a guard at Buckingham Palace until the song ends. And, where some might have chosen a love song, it's the Ethiopian national anthem that Abraham chooses to serenade Selam with when she asks him to sing for her. The primary object of Abraham's love is his country, whose borders, as he says, he wants to protect from insurgents, a country to which he is ready to give his life, and which only takes accepts his two legs.

**Love of other/self** Selam's efforts to turn Abraham away from the object of his love and towards herself are in vain. Abraham leaves her for the front. In contrast to Abraham, Selam makes Abraham the central focus of her love. Although she proclaims that she is an educator by training, and that like Abraham she is a soldier in the service of the people and of Ethiopia, it is Abraham in particular that she loves, it is for him that her heart beats, and it is only when Abraham loves her in return that he is able to silence her anxieties and calm her. So, it is tempting to say that Abraham's love, whose object is the nation, is more altruistic and less selfish than Selam's, whose object is the satisfaction of her own desires. Both loves, on closer inspection, burn with the same fire: the satisfaction of a deep personal desire. The only difference is what provides that satisfaction.

**Selflessness vs. Selfishness** Selflessness is defined as "concern more with the needs and wishes of others than with one's own. Selfishness is defined as seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others. These two attitudes are dramatized by the decisions made by characters in Yilma's *Keletat*. Of Besufikad's two mothers (the biological and the adoptive), one acts selfishly and the other selflessly.

*Keletat* When Semeret and Bruktawit discover that they got pregnant, their decisions are different. Bruktawit acts selflessly by deciding to protect her unborn baby in spite of her family's insistence that she have an abortion. She sacrifices her easy life and is disowned by her father.

On the other hand, Semeret's goal of completing her studies was compromised by a rape that resulted in an unwanted pregnancy. However, she decided that this pregnancy would not stop her in her pursuit of a university degree and a comfortable life. She strove to eliminate the growing child in her womb by taking medication, although her doctor warned her that an abortion at her advanced stage involved great risks. And when, against all odds, the fetus held on to life, and Semeret gave birth, she abandoned her infant in a cemetery.

Later, one learns that Semeret's ingestion of medication has compromised the health of Besufikad. Unless the boy undergoes an expensive heart operation, which Bruktawit cannot afford, the child will die. When Semeret, the boy's biological mother, appears, who can afford to pay for his surgery abroad, and who proposes to do so, Bruktawit vehemently opposes it.

Both Semeret and Bruktawit act selfishly. When Semeret discovers that her son is living but has medical problem she attempts to get him back before spending her resources. However, Bruktawit sees in Semeret's act a ploy to steal "her" child. And Bruktawit is not entirely wrong. Semeret's proposal looks like blackmail. She seems to be saying that she will save Besufikad only if she is recognized as the biological mother of the child and have him returned to her. Semeret could have saved Besufikad through an anonymous philanthropic gesture, but she was too preoccupied with her desire to have "her" child back. And while the two women fight over the legitimate ownership of the child, Besufikad is dying. In a clever cinematic gesture, the filmmaker makes Besufikad overhear the two brawling mothers, enter the room unannounced and collapse in front of them. This emphasizes that the mothers' selfishness trumped over their love for Besufikad.

**Friendship:** In her film, *Taza*, Yilma demonstrates that friendship is a therapy for the depression created by the feeling of being useless and rejected by society. For the young unemployed graduates of Ethiopia, for whom the country has nothing to offer, friendship offers hope and the strength to cling to life and survive the country's fratricidal war. For the main character, his friendship with the unrepentantly patriotic soldier, who refuses to allow himself to be softened by any relationship, enables them both to find life less bleak and to glimpse prospects for the future.

*Taza* Friendship is a powerful antidote to isolation and rejection. The young graduates who return from Cuba, who have been abandoned by their country and offered no opportunity to contribute to its development, form a support group. They meet in a bar, which has become their favorite hangout, to reminisce about the good times in Cuba, to share the pain of the failed return to their homeland, and to help each other. When money for booze is scarce, and their encounters are consequently in jeopardy, Selam sells her jewelry to keep the conversations going over drinks. Although they meet all too often over bottles of booze, the comfort they bring each other is undeniable. When Selam is on the verge of losing her home, they band together to help her find another place to live. Despite his fierce, aloof demeanor, Abraham

discovers in Selam's friendship a compassion he had been missing. Behind his tough, stoic shell, Abraham is a suffering soul, whom Selam caught crying one night when she was fetching water. It's clear that Abraham is tormented. As he grows closer to Selam, Abraham relaxes, learns to let out a few, albeit furtive, smiles, to lie down in the grass and let himself be caressed.

**Choice:** Contrary to the fatalism too often displayed in African cinema, Yilma proposes an ethic of free choice. With *Keletat*, the director seems to be telling her audience that it is the free choice of individuals that determines their future, not fatalism. The director contrasts two protagonists who, on the same issue, make two diametrically opposed choices. These two choices produce two seemingly irreconcilable results. However, Yilma also shows that free will, which allows individuals to make choices in their lives, leads them to go beyond seemingly fixed positions to meet halfway.

*Keletat* Both Semeret and Bruktawit made choices when they were faced with the same dilemma. Their different choices then shaped the direction of their lives and their respective positions in Ethiopian society. Both women were impregnated by the same man. Although their pregnancies happened in different circumstances, neither of them expected or wanted a pregnancy at the moment. Semeret was raped by Seyume, and Bruktawit was date-raped. While drunk at a graduation party, Bruktawit found herself in Seyume's bed the next morning, only to realize that she had had sex with Seyume without her explicit consent. Semeret tried unsuccessfully to abort her pregnancy, and when she gave birth, she abandoned the newborn at a cemetery and went on to finish her studies. As for Bruktawit, she decided to face her father's wrath and her community's gaze. She kept her pregnancy. She gave birth to a little boy, whom she named Besufikad (meaning 'God's will'), and whom she showered with love and affection until the day he accidentally drowned in a bucket of water. Semeret's and Bruktawit's fates meet when Semeret abandons her newborn at the cemetery, and Bruktawit picks it up, claiming that it is her dead child come back to life. Free of the constraints of raising a child, Semeret graduates from university, climbs the social ladder, and becomes an influential woman. Bruktawit, on the other hand, devotes her life to her son as a homemaker and lives an austere life in a run-down neighborhood of Addis Ababa. Their choices of motherhood, for Bruktawit, and of freedom from the constraints of motherhood, for Semeret, determine their positions in Ethiopian society.

## PSYCHOLOGY

**Loss** Yilma tackles the theme of loss from several angles in her film *Keletat*. She mentions the loss of honor, which in Ethiopian society is a disgrace. She also tackles the loss of freedom - freedom of movement as much as freedom of expression - when an overly pride father confines his pregnant daughter to the backyard.

*Keletat* Bruktawit's unwanted pregnancy is to Mr. Girma an incommensurable loss, the loss of the family's honor in the community. Mr. Girma represents his daughter's pregnancy as parricide. He laments that his daughter killed him with her pregnancy, while swearing at the same time that he would have killed her if he were not asked to forgive in the name of the Virgin Mary. Of course, Girma does not kill his daughter, but he makes her and her son lose the freedom to move freely in the family compound. Bruktawit is not allowed to let Girma see her or her son. And every time Girma enters the family compound, the women of the household rush to put little Besufikad out of his sight, and they cover his mouth so that his cries do not irritate the old man. In addition to her confinement and that of her son, which cause the loss of a fulfilling relationship between daughter and father, and grandson and grandfather, Bruktawit also loses the opportunity for social advancement. Her pregnancy interrupts her studies and keeps her in the status of a housewife. And when her son dies, and she is bereaved, Bruktawit gets another son thanks to Semeret's insensitive act of abandoning her newborn in a cemetery. Semeret will feel this senseless act as a loss despite all the success that her education afforded her. Semeret is wracked by guilt of having abandoned her son, by the loss of filial love, and by failed motherhood, until she is given the opportunity to see her son, Besufikad, and participate in his growth and well-being.

**Guilt:** One of the feelings that recollection provokes is guilt. In *Keletat*, apart from extreme cases of shamelessness such as that of the unrepentant rapist, the characters are almost all plagued by guilt for acts committed in the past. This guilt often leads them to change their behavior for the better. Thus, the inflexible father softens his ways. The mother, who once abandoned her son, tries to renew her relationship



with him. And the adoptive mother, who denied the selfish biological mother access to her son, agrees to let her see the child she once rejected.

*Keletat* Soon after she abandons her newborn at a graveyard, and the infant is picked up by Bruktawit, Semeret is overtaken by guilt. Much later, she goes to Bruktawit's home looking for her infant, but she faces the refusal of Bruktawit's relatives to acknowledge her as the mother of the baby Bruktawit brought home from the cemetery. Bruktawit's father, who has shunned his daughter when she was pregnant and refused to see his grandson, also felt guilt. He accepted his daughter's story of her resurrected son and protected her, even though he knew the baby she brought home was not her child. He wanted to make amends for making her a pariah, and he felt guilty for not giving his grandson all the love that he could have afforded him. When Semeret sees her son for the first time, she is again guilt-stricken. Her guilt is heightened when she realizes that Besufikad has health problems, and she learns that the medication she took in her attempt to abort him is the cause of his heart problem. To redress her error, and also more because she missed her son from the day she gave him away, Semeret endeavors to spend more time with the boy and proposes to pay for his medical operation.

**Shame:** The Ethiopian society is one in which shame often dictates decisions, and these decisions keep women, more than men, in a position where justice is denied. Yilma dramatizes this fact in *Keletat* by having her main protagonist, who is the victim of rape, go to great length to hide the fact that she was raped, to conceal the pregnancy that resulted from it, and to abandon her newborn in a cemetery after a failed attempt to abort it. The shame of being labelled a failed woman prevented the rape victim to report her rapist to the authorities. Nevertheless, she was able to frame him and have him arrested without people knowing of her condition as a raped woman. In *Taza*, Yilma explores the relation between shame and honor. Here, it is a whole family that tries to prevent shame, in the form of an unrestrained adoptive daughter and a son accused of treason against flag and country, from destroying their honor.

*Keletat* Having abducted and raped Semeret, Seyume finds it curious that his victim has not yet reported her ordeal to the authorities. One of his friends replies that, like all women, Semeret values her honor and will be ashamed if people knew what happened to her. Indeed, one of the elements that seems to have guided Semeret's actions is shame, disappointing her parents, and more particularly her father, and being indexed in her community as a disgraced woman, who not only was raped—here, the victim becomes the guilty party, and the shame falls on the victim and not the victimizer—but who, on top of that, conceived a child outside of marriage. It is also the shame of being regarded in his community as unworthy of respect which consumes Bruktawit's father, makes him exclaim that his daughter killed him and leads him to forbid his daughter from showing herself to him or presenting to his eyes the fruit of her shameless act, the child conceived from an illegitimate relationship.

*Taza* When Abraham castigates Selam for drinking too much, she justifies her addiction to alcohol as a way of drowning her shame for not being useful to her country. She tells him that her friends and she are not mere bums, and that they are intellectuals educated in Cuba, who have returned to Ethiopia to understand that the country has no need of them. Their shame of uselessness drove them to gradually become alcoholic. So long as Selam lives with his parents, Selam's reprehensible actions brings shame to his family, too. The neighbors do gossip about Selam's immoral behavior, and for Abraham, this is unacceptable. Thus, he tells his parents, "Something must be done about this girl," meaning, she must be driven away from the family and stopped from staining the family's reputation. By being accused of and jailed for treason, Abraham himself brought enough shame upon his family. Although Abraham's imprisonment has not been reported in the neighborhood, and his neighbors are unaware of the criminal charges brought against the commander, the fact remains that for Abraham's family a shameful stain has been cast on the household honor. Being labelled a traitor was for Abraham, the patriot, the biggest shame that could befall on him and his family, and it is unacceptable that Selam, through her anti-social behavior, should add more to the family's worries.

**Honor** For Abraham and his family, one conviction remains unshakeable: Honor must be cleansed, restored. After he is freed from jail, all Abraham wants is to redeem himself, to restore his integrity as a man. When Selam asks him not to go to war, he replies that he is a man, meaning, he has a manly responsibility to fulfill and a family honor to uphold. And when she physically prevents him from getting into his jeep and leaving, he tells her not to shame him, and he pushes her to the ground and leaves. Although

Abraham's mother is saddened to see him go to a war from which he might never come back alive, she tells Selam that she wants him to go and be a hero, that is, she wants him to wash away the shame that has stained their family since the day Abraham was accused of treason and sidelined by the army. The mother's fear of shame and quest for restoration of family honor trumps her fear to lose her son. Therefore, although her heart is heavy with sadness, and unlike Eschu's mother, who cries and wants to prevent Eschu from leaving for war, she sends Abraham away with her blessings.

## FLAWS

**Pride:** Male pride is a common theme in Ethiopian cinema. Yilma makes no exception to the rule of Ethiopian filmmakers who criticize excessive pride in men. In *Kelelat*, she shows how the pride of patriarchy drives women to desperate acts. To protect her father from shame, one of the film's protagonists commits the abominable act of abandoning her newborn child, conceived out of wedlock and through rape, in a cemetery. However, Yilma also shows that while the pride of patriarchy has long been a stranglehold on women, this domination is loosening with the refusal by a new breed of proud women to give their fathers unconditional obedience.

*Kelelat* Pride, and especially masculine pride, is a recurrent theme in Ethiopian cinema, as has been demonstrated in *Difret* (2014), *Lamb* (2015), *79* (2015), and *Embi* (2018), to cite only these few. In *Kelelat*, Semeret's father thanks his wife for giving him a daughter who makes him proud by earning her high school diploma. Though he would have been prouder with a son, he concedes that a daughter with a degree is as worthy as a son. He is joyful. He dances and showers his wife and daughter with money and proudly offers his daughter his prized necklace. Semeret's father's pride would have been crushed had he known of his daughter's pregnancy. She understands that and, more for not disappointing her father than for her own sake, she tries to abort her unwanted pregnancy. When she fails to get rid of her pregnancy, she abandons her newborn in a cemetery. Semeret's undesirable pregnancy came as the result of her flouting a man's honor and pride. Seyume, the leader of a gang of four students, asked Semeret to go out with him, and she turned him down. This, for Seyume, was an insult that needed reparation. Therefore, Seyume had his gang abduct Semeret for him to rape.

Unlike Semeret, Bruktawit did not care much about her father's pride and honor. She decided to keep her pregnancy, to the great consternation of her father. Of course, out of respect for her father, Bruktawit and her mother brought in an elderly neighbor to announce the bad news to him. For her father, it was an incommensurable humiliation. He lamented that his daughter had dishonored him, had killed him even. He swore that if the elderly neighbor had not evoked the name of the Virgin Mary, he would have killed his daughter for soiling his pride. And to keep what little pride he had left after his daughter's abominable act of getting pregnant while unmarried, Bruktawit's father forbade the people in the house to mention his grandson in his presence, and he ordered them to make sure that the child never came into his sight.

**Sexual Violence: Rape** Rape against women is a recurrent crime in Ethiopian society: This crime that often arrests women's prospect for social mobility too often goes unpunished. This is because raped women are generally reluctant to press charges because of the stigma associated with being a victim of rape. In *Kelelat*, Yilma empowers women when a strong woman, without stirring up the community about her condition as a rape victim, finds an indirect way of getting her tormentor arrested.

*Kelelat* In Ethiopian cinema, rape seems to be among the menaces that haunt the lives of Ethiopian women. The situation is all the more alarming since an antiquarian mentality, which tends to blame rape victims for being morally loose, prevents them from seeking justice from the authorities, thereby allowing their victimizers to continue their misdeeds without being arrested. Seyume's rape of Semeret is not his first crime. Three years earlier, he had taken advantage of Bruktawit being drunk at a party to rape her. And since she did not report Seyume's crime, he went on to rape other girls. Seyume is certainly a serial rapist. His victims have kept silent out of shame, and his misdeeds have undoubtedly put an end to the dreams of advancement of several women while he celebrates his deviant prowess. With this film, the Ethiopian filmmaker certainly sends a message that male honor, which makes women bear the burden of shame and reduces them to silence, must be challenged and defeated. Women must speak to name their tormentors. For this, their words must not be censored by patriarchal honor.

**Transience** The authority of the father in Ethiopian tradition is powerful. The father's laws are unquestionable, and his judgment is generally irreversible. However, in *Kelelat*, Yilma signals not only the reversibility of the father's judgment, but also the weakening of his power and the weaning of his influence of women. When the female character doesn't play the father, deceive him, or circumvent his dictates through dissimulation and false pretenses, she rejects those dictates outright.

*Kelelat* Things will never be the same again after Bruktawit's and Semeret's passages in Ethiopian society. The authority of patriarchy, hitherto omnipotent and unquestionable, has been altered with Bruktawit's defiance of her father and her community. Mr. Girma is right to say that his daughter has killed him. In fact, she has killed his dogmatic, patriarchal and absolute hold on the family. By defying him, keeping her pregnancy, and raising her child openly and publicly, what Bruktawit says to her family and her community is that she is a line of flight that follows the trajectory of her own desires. She no longer follows an arborescent genealogy, whereby one is a "good girl" insofar as one behaves according to the father's commands. She has branched out. She is now a rhizome that grows new, lateral shoots. She desires a child, and she will have it despite her father's wrath and the community's disapproval. At the end, Bruktawit's resistance breaks the father's intransigence and makes him her accomplice. It is patriarchy reviewing its stance, becoming supple, adapting to a society where women demand to be heard and emancipated. That emancipation finds its realization mainly through education. For Semeret, it means forging through or around the obstacles to women's education, which can take the form of denouncing a chauvinistic criminal like Seyume, the rapist, getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy, or giving away an undesired child. As crude as this might seem, it is the expression of an individual desire, an anti-genealogical act, which harnesses more power for Semeret. Now, she is an influential woman, and she can have a chair at the decision-making table, as is shown during her appearance on TV. Semeret and Bruktawit, in their different ways, emancipate Ethiopian women from the grip of patriarchy.

**MEMORY** Yilma makes extensive use of the cinematic flashback technique to evoke the past. In *Kelelat*, this technique is used every time the characters recall their past. It's a painful past that comes to them as violent jolts, interrupting the present. Yilma suggests, however, that these blows of memory have a therapeutic force. They enable people to make amends in the present and redeem themselves.

*Kelelat* Yilma makes abundant use of flashbacks in *Kelelat*, to the point that it becomes sometimes difficult to follow the storyline. However, the filmmaker uses this filmic technique as a pointer of memory. Their pasts haunt the characters, and these are pasts made of pain and regret. For example, Seyume is a constant fixture in Semeret's life. The images of his victorious snickers (when he comes across Semeret on campus after the rape) play constantly in her head and prevent her from relaxing and focusing on her studies. She becomes melancholic and hides her face under a hood. The further her pregnancy develops, the more the image of Seyume's violating her body resurfaces. Even the sight of the necklace that her father once so proudly placed around her neck becomes a source of sadness. Seyume has ruined even the most precious memory in Semeret's life. She frames Seyume and gets him arrested, and this gives her some solace to continue her studies.

Later, however, it is the image of her abandoning her infant in a cemetery that comes to Semeret in shockwaves and makes her feel guilty and sad. To exorcise this painful memory, Semeret seeks out her child and tries to be part of his life, even tries to get him back, especially when she learns that her past foolishness, (taking a drug in the hope of getting rid of her unwanted pregnancy) has affected Besufikad's heart and reduced his life expectancy.

After Bruktawit loses her three-year-old child, the memory of him playing in the family compound becomes unbearable. The child's gravesite becomes her retreat, where she spends long hours, every day, waiting for his resurrection until the day she thinks to have found him in Semeret's abandoned newborn.

Mr. Girma cannot forgive himself for shunning his daughter and his grandson. This memory becomes difficult to bear, especially with the death of Besufikad. He tries to make amends with his daughter by comforting her and going along with her myth of Besufikad's resurrection. Nevertheless, the past catches up to him and his daughter when Semeret's memory, of her painful past as a neglectful and selfish young mother, reappears and wants her child back.

**Home** Yilma's films deal with the theme of home as the place where one finds peace and comfort. In *Rebuni*, Leul's home is a place of conflict with his wife. So, he takes refuge in his office and his work, that is, until he meets Adey, whose environment becomes for him a place of solace. In *Taza*, Yilma deals more explicitly with this theme, both in the film's title and in its intrigue. She examines the taken-for-granted notion of loyalty to a nation, when Ethiopian youths, upon returning from studying in Cuba, find it difficult to integrate the Ethiopian social fabric and feel irrelevant, like outsiders.

*Taza* As evidenced by its title, "What is home?" seems to be one of the main questions posed by *Taza*. For Abraham's father, who answers this question for Selam, home is where your people are. For Selam, this definition is not sufficient. Home, for her is where you are loved. Selam and her friends do not feel that Ethiopia loves them. After the fall of Haile Selassie's feudal regime and the advent of the communist Derg government, Selam and her friends were sent to Cuba to study with the promise of jobs upon their return. Since they came back, they have been put on the back-burner with no jobs. Their feeling of irrelevance and worthlessness drives them to alcohol. Each night, when they come out of the bar where they drink on credit or by pawning or selling their few possessions, they are harassed by zealous soldiers. Some of them, like Selam, have no stable shelter and are constantly under threat of being evicted from their house or beaten by rigid, chauvinistic males like Abraham. They feel like strangers in their own country, which leads them to a deep nostalgia about Cuba. Referring to Cuba, Selam, who is looking at an old photo album of her stay there, tells Abraham's father that she misses 'her country'. The old man does not understand why she calls Cuba her homeland while she has no natural connection with the country. She tells him that Cuba is where she felt loved. It is, thus, her homeland. Later, there develops a romantic relation between Selam and Abraham. He promises her to protect her. It is only then that Selam feels the love of home. She confides in Abraham that for the first time since she came back from Cuba, she felt at home, because she felt loved.

**War** The Ethiopian turmoil that followed the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie and the rise of the Derg bloody, military regime with its repression of armed opposition has filmic materials to Ethiopian film producers. Yilma's treatment of the theme of war denounces the state's propagandist fanning of pride and honor in time of war, which pitch the children of the same country against one another. The filmmaker also denounces the social waste of war and how it not only distracts the government from its task of working on the people's wellbeing but also kills any hope for a better future.

*Taza* The power struggle between the Derg government and the anti-revolutionary movements in Ethiopia, which resulted in a brutal civil war, affected the Ethiopians in a serious way. As was the case in other Ethiopian movies, (such as *79* and *Fig Tree*), the effects of the civil war are denounced in *Taza*. Consumed by a war that it wages against its own people, the Ethiopian government has put little effort into developing the country. Consequently, educated youths, who have returned from years of studies in Cuba, such as Selam and her friends, are left with nowhere to turn to but bury their sorrows in alcohol. Selam tells Abraham that her addiction to alcohol is caused by unemployment and the feeling worthlessness. War also kills the people's desire to plan a future. After years of irrelevance, Selam falls in love with Abraham. However, Abraham is called to war, and, despite her pleas that he stay with her, he pushes her away and goes to the battlefield. Selam is so despondent that she confides in her friends that she will never again fall in love in a time of war. Abraham's leaving has left a void, not just in Selam's life, but also in his parents' life. His mother is saddened to see him leave her only a few weeks after he has been freed from jail and exonerated from the charge of betraying his country. Like Abraham's mother, the electrician's mother is also despondent to see her child leave her. She begs him not to leave her alone, but to no avail. For the electrician, as is the case for Abraham, war is a place to prove himself. Although the electrician returns a hero, Abraham loses both his legs. Abraham is a symbol of how Ethiopia wastes its brightest sons with war. Another one of Selam's friends, a young unemployed doctor, has also decided to enlist. One can only surmise that he is likely to be among Ethiopia's talents that the civil war has wasted.

**War and raison d'Etat** For politicians, war is often a means of retaining power. It's a way of inventing an imaginary enemy, on the other side of an imaginary line, who poses an imaginary threat to the people, against which the people must present a united front. Thus, the revolutionary Derg regime has found an enemy (all factions considered anti-revolutionary) against which the Ethiopian people must mobilize or be branded traitors. Here, suspicion and denunciation reign, and the slightest misstep is treated as an act of treason. Abraham bore the brunt of this denunciation when he was accused of sabotaging military operations. In these warlike agitations which it is forbidden to question for "higher reason," brothers are

armed against their brothers and cousins against their cousins. In a tragicomic scene from *Taza*, a soldier asks his comrades in arms to give him time to identify the soldiers they are shooting at, because his cousin is fighting on the "enemy" side, and he wants to be able to save him. This scene reinforces the very absurdity of the concept of enemy which is brandished by politicians as a motivation for war when it is only a question of a means for the conservation of power.

**War and Honor** Alongside this state hypocrisy, this political maneuvering that makes war its business, there's the soldier. The soldier whose ego is beaten to a froth, like a cook beating an omelet, is convinced, as Abraham is, that the condition of his being lies in a heroism developed on the battlefield. The deception has taken such hold that Abraham tells his superior that he doesn't need a salary to fight for his country, that he would give his life for his country. Abraham is a lucky man. He, who intended to die for Ethiopia, gives his country only two of his limbs. And this other soldier, who was only waiting for the end of the war to find his cousin and buy his mother a beautiful scarf, dies on the battlefield with a bullet between the eyes. Just like this other soldier, who was also titillated by the state's beautiful propaganda, and who, dying of a bullet from Abraham, asks him to give his son the flag riddled with the bullets that were intended for him, and to tell him that he died for a unified Ethiopia. The egocentric politician and the titillated soldier find in war a justification for their agitation.

**Quest:** Although seeking tends to optimistically presuppose finding, the quest does not always lead to the discovery of the wanted object. However, the process of seeking can lead to the revelation of happy moments. Such is the case with the grandfather of *Rebuni's* main character, whose unsuccessful quest for a cure for his granddaughter brings the community together in an ethic of sharing and empathy. Such is also the case for the capitalist, Leul, whose quest for the main character's land, which he would like to transform into an industrial complex, gradually leads him to an ecological appreciation of his surroundings, an empathy for others, and a humility that puts him at the service of his fellow countrymen. In other instances, however, as is the case of the main protagonist in *Keletat*, in the search for their object of desire, people can be driven by egotism, losing, thereby, all sense of empathy.

*Rebuni* *Rebuni* dramatizes the theme of quest in various forms. Dr. Yotor's quest is to find a medicine that will cure his granddaughter. Although he is known to relieve the pains of the sick who are brought to him, Dr. Yotor has been searching in vain for a cure against Adey's leukemia. His inability to come up with a solution drug for Adey fills him with sadness, and it is his granddaughter who comforts him, telling him that she knows he has tried his best, and that he must not see his failure to cure her as a betrayal.

Adey's quest is for love and reconciliation. In the last few days left for her to live, she gradually falls in love with Leul. Knowing that she has little time left to live, Adey tries to make the best of every moment she spends with Leul. Adey's quest for love is cut short, as she dies just a few days after Leul moves forward with a divorce in the hope of being with her.

Leul's initial quest was for land, but over time, he abandons that goal and focuses on his romantic relationship with Adey. With Adey gone, a disconsolate Leul returns to his wife, Ribka, and her persistent quest for an elusive pregnancy. In fact, Ribka has been trying to be pregnant, and she believes that her husband is more in the pursuit of money and fame than having children. She decides that she wants a divorce. However, when Ribka understands that Leul might be interested in Adey, she changes her mind and decides to reconquer her husband. Ribka gets her wish and become pregnant. Leul reluctantly settles into a family life with Ribka, having lost both the primary object of his quest (Adey's land) and his secondary quest (a love life with Adey). Nevertheless, insofar as Leul and Ribka's reconciliation, which was wished for by Adey, happens, and insofar as the couple are finally able to conceive a child, quest is not necessarily presented by the filmmaker as the pursuit of an elusive, unattainable object of desire. Quest can also be a reachable endeavor.

*Keletat* The search for happiness is at the heart of *Keletat's* characters' preoccupations. For Semeret's father, happiness means maintaining the family's honor and respectability. While this happiness is usually achieved through the son, here, it is the daughter, Semeret, who, by obtaining her diploma, is its source. Semeret's father is proud of his daughter and exclaims that he is ready to die this day if it is God's will, because his daughter has made him a fulfilled man. The pride her parents take in her upbringing defines Semeret's main preoccupation: succeeding, finishing her studies and achieving a respectable position on

the social ladder. To this end, Semeret eliminates anything that might stand in the way of this fulfillment. She tries to abort an unwanted pregnancy, and when this fails, and she is forced to give birth, she disposes of the child by abandoning it in a cemetery, on the grave of the son of a woman, Bruktawit. For Bruktawit, motherhood is non-negotiable. Although her disgraceful pregnancy contradicts her father's desire to preserve the family's honor through the purity of his daughter, Bruktawit will not get rid of her pregnancy. She nurtures it to term and gives birth to a boy. And when this boy dies by accident, she mourns him every day, asks God to resurrect him, and finds him again, in the form of the newborn that Semeret has abandoned in the cemetery. Although fulfilled, Semeret's and Bruktawit's quests still leave them longing. Semeret longs for a lost motherhood, and Bruktawit longs for the education she never pursued.

*Taza* Accused, wrongly according to him, of having betrayed the revolution by deploying his troops in such a way as to lose a battle against the anti-revolutionary insurgents, Abraham is incarcerated in a military prison. When he is released on bail while waiting to be completely cleansed of the stain of treason, Abraham has only one quest: that of proving his loyalty to his country by regaining command of his troops as a hero in the war. This opportunity is offered to him when a military investigation clears him and he is sent to the battlefield. However, while waiting for the conclusion of the protracted investigation, Abraham's quest is threatened by Selam's behaviors. She gets drunk, runs into trouble with some abusive soldiers, and Abraham has to come to her defense by beating the soldiers, thus threatening his reinstatement. At one point, Abraham's parents' home is raided by soldiers looking for him for beating up one of their one, and Abraham and Selam have to escape by climbing over the back fence.

Selam's quest for love is also a threat to Abraham's quest for heroism. She falls in love with him and he with her. For a moment, he thinks of settling with her, promising her that he will be there to protect her, and that no one will ever mistreat her again. However, his desire for heroism is so overwhelming that he decides to leave for the war front. Selam tries physically to prevent him from going, but he pushes her away and gets in a jeep, leaving her crying on the ground. Selam and Abraham both get their quests fulfilled, though in a tragic way: Abraham comes back from the war legless. Selam tells him that she is pregnant by him. He cannot speak, but he extends his arm and feels her belly. They both cry with pain and joy. They have found each other and love. Abraham, who once vowed that he would die for his country, found heroism as a wounded war veteran.

## CHARACTERS

### Open

**SEMERET** She is a transitional woman. Her path to emancipation by means of education took her through moments that she came to be repentant about. In fact, she failed in her attempt to abort her pregnancy. When the fetus did not die, she gave her newborn away. Later, as she felt remorseful and tried to reconnect with her child, she learned that her botched abortion seriously affected the child's heart.

### Agreeable

1. **ADEY** (*Rebuni*) Despite her naïve, cheerful, and sometimes clownish ways, Adey is an intelligent girl. She has been designated to become her family's matriarch, and her grandfather trusts her enough to give her custody of the family farm. She proves to be a wise landowner and a formidable teacher in things pertaining to life when Leul comes seeking to buy her farm.
2. **LEUL** (*Rebuni*) Leul is a character whose personality changes throughout the film. At first, he comes across as unsympathetic, arrogant and disrespectful. However, his contact with Adey brings about a transformation in him. She guides him through his rediscovery of the nature within him to be a more friendly, less hostile character. He even comes to question his profession and his formerly pronounced aim of accumulating wealth. The disagreeable character at the beginning of the film becomes agreeable at the end.
3. **ABULE** (*Rebuni*) Little Abule is a mischievous and jealous child. He likes to make jokes, and Leul, with his imperious air, becomes the boy's favorite victim. Abule covers Leul's car with mud, causes him to trip while tying the laces of his two shoes together, and pushes him into a

muddy ravine, dirtying his immaculate office clothes. He doesn't really like Leul, and he lets him know it.

4. **ABRAHAM'S MOTHER** (*Taza*) Abraham's mother is an empathic and stoic woman. She opens her arms to Selam, treats the young woman as her own daughter, and protects her the best she can against her violent son. Even though Selam is not paying her rent, the old woman is reluctant to evict her. The old woman also seems to accept her son's decision to go to war with uncharacteristic stoicism, although the prospect of losing him keeps haunting her.

### Disagreeable

**ABRAHAM** (*Taza*) Abraham is a serious, proud, and sometimes violent man. He lives by a military code of conduct by which problems are solved in a soldierly way. He fights his fellow soldiers to rescue Selam from the abuse. Even when he resolves to tell her that he loves her, Abraham orders Selam to leave the bar and follow him home. And when she protests, he kisses her by force.

### Emotional

1. **BRUKTAWIT** (*Keletat*) She is a strong, irrational, and caring woman. She defied her father's and her community's disapproval and kept her pregnancy and gave birth to a boy, whom she raised with love and care. When he died, however, she was convinced that he would come back to life, and later she believed an abandoned newborn to be her resurrected child. She raised that child with the same love she gave her son and protected him against negative remarks. Her world starts to crumble when the biological mother of the child resurfaces.
2. **MR. GIRMA** (*Keletat*) He is a strict, hypocritical, and remorseful character. He disowned his daughter because she got pregnant before getting married. However, he would hide and play with his grandson when no one was watching. When his grandson died, he was grief-stricken for having been so intransigent towards his daughter. He then became her accomplice in a years-long deception.
3. **SELAM** (*Taza*) Selam is a melancholic and lonely young woman. She is despondent over her plight since she came back from Cuba with a teaching degree and the hope of finding a job in her country but found nothing. Her irrelevance makes her feel like a stranger in her country, and she tries to bury her loneliness in alcohol. In spite of her apparent exuberance, it is only when Abraham falls in love with her that she feels that she is happy and not lonely. However, he soon leaves her for war.