

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

## HOME / Taza (2017)

Kidist Yilma

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur* 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). She is married to Ethiopian actor Amanuel Habtamu, whom she cast in three of her films, *Rebuni*, which won Ethiopia's most prized award, the Gumma, *Taza*, and *Meba*. The success of Yilma's features, coupled with the blossoming of new Amharic-language TV stations in Ethiopia starting in 2000, have prompted Yilma to start producing TV content. She is credited as being among the Ethiopian filmmakers who are contributing to the fast-growing Ethiopian cinema.

*Film* The Amhara title of *Taza* translates in English as 'Home'. The film starts with the date of 1990 in the Gregorian calendar. It ends with the capture of Addis Ababa by the guerilla movement for which the character Eschu is fighting and against which Abraham and his troops are battling. The film thus spans a year's time, from 1990 to 1991, the fiercest period of the Ethiopian civil war that is estimated to have killed over 1 million civilians. More than a film about the war, *Taza* dramatizes the waste of war, that is, how a government involves itself so much in fighting that it forgets about other aspects of what it means to govern a country.

*Background* Although *Taza* is listed among Ethiopia's twenty most important films, it does not seem to have garnered much international recognition. Ethiopians, however, praise it as dramatizing an important historical aspect of their country's turbulent history and the need for unity.

### CHARACTERS

<i>Abraham</i>	An Ethiopian commander accused of treason.
<i>Abraham's mother</i>	She takes in Selam, a young Ethiopian woman, who has no home.
<i>Selam</i>	A young woman, who has returned from Cuba but has no job and no home.
<i>Eschu</i>	Electrician, a friend of Selam's, who studied with her in Cuba

### SYNOPSIS

Abraham, a commander in the Derg army, is accused of treason and jailed in a military prison. While he is away, his parents rent his room to Selam, a young woman who has returned to Ethiopia after years of study in Cuba, and who cannot find a job in her country. Selam's feeling of irrelevance drives her to alcohol. While waiting for an investigation to determine his final fate, Abraham is freed on bail. He goes home to realize that he cannot recover his room immediately. His parents have rented it to Selam, whom they treat almost as their own daughter. Abraham is annoyed with Selam's boisterous and embarrassing behavior when she gets drunk, and he is resolute to evict her from the family compound, using sometimes violent means. However, his mother's care for Selam causes Abraham to start looking after the young woman and fight to protect her. Gradually, Abraham falls in love with Selam, and the two develop a romantic relation to the great joy of Abraham's mother and to the great chagrin of Eschu, a friend and admirer of Selam, who studied with her in Cuba. He never had the courage to confess his feelings to the young woman. And when she started showing interest in Abraham, Eschu's broken heart, coupled with his lack of job opportunity, drive him to volunteer for war. Having been cleared by the military investigation, Abraham decides to go to war to show his patriotism and become the hero that his jail time has prevented him from being. Selam begs him to stay with him. She even tries to physically hold him back, but Abraham's call to duty seems stronger than his love for Selam. He violently pushes her away and leaves for war, abandoning Selam in tears. A few months later, Selam and Abraham's mother find him lying in a makeshift wounded soldiers' hospital. Both his legs have been amputated. A sobbing Selma tells him that she is pregnant by him.

Abraham cannot talk. However he stretches his arm and affectionately feels Selma's belly.

## SCENES

**The Patriot** Abraham is sitting before his superior. He is played a recording in which a soldier accuses him of having ordered a redeployment of his soldiers that was against the army's strategic plans. In other words, a betrayal of his country. Abraham defends himself, saying that he did not betray his country. Commander Abraham is thrown in jail. Abraham is summoned by his superior to receive a few months' back pay. Abraham tells his superior that money is not what matters to him. He tells him that he is a patriot, who would serve his country for free if asked to. Abraham's superior tells him to hang in there, and that he knows that the investigation will clear him. A soldier tells Abraham that he is free to go, but his case is still under investigation. When he hears the national anthem being played on a loudspeaker, Abraham stands up, solemnly faces the national flag through a window and waits till the end of the national anthem before leaving his cell.



**Homecoming** Commander Abraham returns home. His parents are moved to see him and start celebrating joyfully. He orders them to keep silent, saying that he needs peace and tranquility. He does not even give them a gesture of affection. He passes them and goes straight into the house. Abraham's parents are worried. They have been renting his room to Selam, a young, eccentric woman, while he was away. They have gotten used to her being with them and have been treating her as their own daughter. Now, they do not know how to tell her that she will have to vacate the room. Abraham is sharing his first meal with his parents since his homecoming. He does not talk. He is sitting up straight with a grave face. His father feeds his mother some *injera* (a spongy flat bread) and then feeds Abraham, too. Abraham tells his parents that he wants to withdraw to his room. His parents look at each other, not knowing what to say. Then, his mother replies that she has not had time to prepare his room. His father insists that until his room is ready, he should sleep in the living room, which his mother has gone through the trouble of getting ready for him. Abraham is sitting in the living room with his father. The old man asks him what happened to him. He wants to know why Abraham has become so melancholic since his return. Abraham tells his father that nothing is wrong with him. The old man asks him to just try and live happily.



**Selam's group** Selam is among a group of young Ethiopians sent in the mid-1980s by the Derg regime to Cuba to study. Upon their return to their country, the jobs they were promised are nowhere to be found. They often meet in a local bar to drink, play checkers, and ruminate about their fate and the unmet promises made to them by their government. Selam pawns her jewelry to pay for the drinks. A man in the bar has been observing Selam's gang. He asks them what they do in life, why they are always sitting in the bar. Selam retorts that if he has been watching them all this time, he might be unemployed, too. She tells him that his professional field, like hers, must not be in demand in the country. The man tells Selam's gang that the Cubans taught them irrelevant skills.



**Living on credit** Selam is sad. She goes to her room and stays there for hours. Abraham's mother is worried and comes to knock on her door. Selam comes out and tells her that she is stressed. The mother tells her not to be, and that a solution will be found. The mother sends Selam to the nearby shop for some errands. Selam keeps the money and asks the shopkeeper to add the purchase to her tab. The shopkeeper warns Selam that her tab has been growing uncontrollably. Selam promises to pay, asks some neighborhood children to take the groceries to the mother, and goes to join her gang in the bar.



**Selam is drunk** Selam comes home drunk, singing loudly and dancing. She wakes Abraham up. Abraham's mother tries to get her to keep silent, but Selam asks if she really intend to kick her out of her home. She also asks if she is no longer her daughter. She insists on being introduced to Abraham. The mother tells her to wait until tomorrow for that. From his living room bed, Abraham can hear them.

**Abraham sees Selam** Abraham's father is praying. Abraham comes out of the living room and casts a circular glance around the compound, which has been overtaken by weeds. The water tower is in ruin. Abraham sees Selam coming out of his room. She sits on the door step to put on her shoes. She sees him and smiles at him. Abraham looks at Selam sternly. He does not smile back. She playfully puts on her makeup. Abraham goes to the living room where his mother is doing some cleaning. Selam follows him there. He asks his mother if she rented his room. Abraham does not see Selam standing behind him. The mother replies that Selam has been warned and will be vacating the room soon. Selam is sad. She turns around and leaves. Abraham insists that he wants his room immediately, and that he needs to be alone in his space. His mother replies that it will be as he wishes.



**Selam must move out** Selam is up after a long night out. Abraham's mother asks her if she has eaten yet and brings her some food. Abraham's father scolds her for sleeping past mid-day. Abraham's father breaks the news to her that their son is coming back and that she will have to find a new place as he will need to get his room back. Selam tells them that if it is because of her late nights out, she can change her ways. And if it is because of the low rent, she is willing to pay more. Abraham's mother tells her that it is neither and reminds her that, besides, she has not been paying any rent.



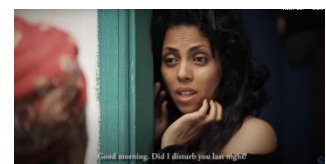
**One week reprieve** Selam is helping Abraham's mother in the kitchen. The mother tells her that she loves her as her daughter and would like her to stay, but her unconventional ways have made her the talk of the neighborhood, and on top of that, her son is now pressuring her to recover his room. She tells Selam that she does not know what to do. Selam asks for a week's extension. The mother tells Selam that if she stops drinking, she can stay with her, even if not in Abraham's room. Selam jumps up and gives the mother a big kiss. Selam goes to tell her gang that she is granted a week's extension on her room. They show her the money they were able to gather to help her find a new place. She suggests that they use the money to celebrate her extension. So, they head to the bar. Selam comes home at night, drunk and raucous. The mother tries in vain to keep her quiet. Abraham can hear Selam shout in the compound.



**Back to drinking** Selam is in the bar. She has decided not to drink alcohol, but she cannot bring herself to drink the soft drink she ordered. She just stares at it. She finally grabs a bottle of gin from the counter and brings it to her gang's table. Selam comes home drunk and loud again while Abraham and his parents are at the dinner table. The father explains to Abraham that he kicked her out twice, and his mother asked her to return. The mother protests that Selam is a human being, and that they cannot just throw her onto the street. She asks that they be patient until Selam finds a place, and that she has always been a daughter to them. Selam comes rushing into the living room, drunk. The mother tries unsuccessfully to stop her. She salutes Abraham derisively. She sits in a chair facing him. She tells him that with his long beard, he looks like he just came out of jail. Abraham looks at her visibly annoyed. The father forces Selam out of the living room. Abraham tells his father that something must be done about "this girl."



**Next Day** Abraham's mother knocks on Selam's door to wake her up. Selam comes out and asks if she had been rowdy last night. The mother tells Selam that Abraham is coming for her and urges her to get out quickly. As Selam prepares to leave, Abraham arrives. He calls her a loose, shameful woman and orders her to pack her things and leave immediately.



**The tale of the good Samaritan** Abraham's father is reading the passage of the Bible related to the Good Samaritan, which teaches about loving one's neighbors and coming to their help when they need it. Abraham and Selam are listening to him, Abraham from the living room and Selam from the compound. Abraham is visibly touched by his father's reading.



**Abraham saves Selam** Selam leaves the house. Abraham's mother cannot sleep. Abraham wants to know what the matter is with her. She tells him that she is worried about Selam being out alone in the street, at night, with nowhere to go. She tells Abraham that she is worried about Selam the same way she would worry about him. Abraham tells his mother that Selam is a drunk. She retorts that when people are desperate, they can commit suicide, and that Selam is a girl who gave up on life because she lost all hope. That she must not be judged. Images of himself losing hope and pointing a gun at his own head come flashing before Abraham's eyes. Abraham tells his mother to go to bed. He promises her to bring back Selam. Selam and her friends have just come out of the bar. They are dancing to salsa music in the street. Two policemen accost them and order them to kneel down. Selam protests that they have done nothing wrong. She sees Abraham and hails him. Abraham asks the policemen what Selam and her friends have done. The policemen ask him to mind his own business. Abraham knocks down the policemen and takes Selam home. On the way home, Selam sings and dances sultrily around Abraham. He stops and watches her, irritated. Then, he picks her up, puts her on his shoulder, and carries her home.



**Kicked out again** In the morning, Abraham wakes Selam up by drenching her with a tub of water. She gets up in shock, screaming. He tells her that she has five minutes to leave the house. Abraham then calls his mother and asks her to send someone to take Selam's things out of his bedroom. Selam is in the street, on a rainy day. She goes to see her friends. They loan her some warm clothes. They lament that shelter, a fundamental human necessity, is not guaranteed in Ethiopia. Selam and her friends joke and laugh and wonder what life would be if even laughter and melancholic lyrics were taken away from them.



**Abraham saves Selam again** Abraham's mother's previous words about not judging Selam keep playing in his head. He goes out looking for her and finds her being questioned by two policemen again. The police want to know why he is out after the curfew. They ask for his ID but he does not have it on him. Selam tells the police that Abraham is a commander and that his house is not far. The police accompany them at home to verify Abraham's identity. They apologize and leave while Selam is mocking them.

**My country** Abraham's father is fixing some electrical wires on a ceiling. Selam is going through a photo album and smiling. Abraham's father asks her if she misses her relatives. She tells him that she misses Cuba, 'her country'. The old man tells her that she is already in her homeland. She asks him if he thinks that Ethiopia is really her country. She asks him why Abraham is so cruel with her. The old man wants to know how Abraham's treatment of her is relevant to her notion of country. He tells her that a country is where one's relatives and people live. She replies by asking him if she has relatives and people in Ethiopia. She tells him that she is a Cuban.

**Selam is electrocuted** The old man leaves the electrical work for his son to finish. Selam gets on the ladder and tries to help. She gets an electric shock, falls and loses consciousness. The family hear her fall and run to her. Abraham picks up Selam from the floor and lays her on the living room sofa. The whole family sits around to tend to her. Selam wakes up and looks around. She sees Abraham's hostile face and wants to leave. Abraham scolds the young woman for trying to fix an electrical cable with no experience in the matter. She retorts that it is better she, rather than he, dies of electrocution because his death would be unbearable to his parents, whereas her death would be mourned by no one. The mother is offended and cries. She tells Selam that she is her daughter as much as Abraham is her son, and that she must stop saying this nonsense. Selam comforts the mother.





**Abraham is jealous of Eschu** Abraham picks up Selam's photo album, which she forgot on the doorstep of her room. He sees pictures of her in Cuba. Eschu, Selam's radio-repair friend, has come to fix the electrical cable in the compound. Abraham watches him work. Abraham also notices that Selam's friend is attracted to her, and she flirts with him, too. Abraham looks at Selam severely.



**Eschu will enlist** Eschu, tells one of his friends that the war between the Derg and the anti-revolutionary groups has intensified. The government is forcing men to enlist. Eschu tells his friend that he will go voluntarily. He thinks that he is worthless and cannot even afford to date Selam. He tells his friend that he saw Abraham look at Selam with interest.

**Drunk again** The mother sends Selam to look for some coffee in the kitchen cabinet. Selam discovers a bottle of hard liquor there and is elated. She goes to the mother, drunk, with half of the bottle's content in her hand. Selam makes a mess in the kitchen and starts singing loudly in the compound. She defiantly stands before Abraham and tells him that this place is her home, and that he cannot ask her to leave. In the morning, Abraham drenches Selam again with a bucketful of water' Selam screams in frustration. The mother takes out Selam's mattress to get it dry in the sun.



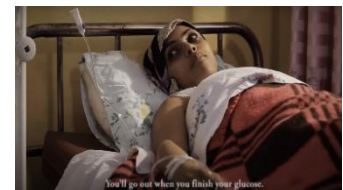
**Abraham is too serious** Abraham is shaving in the compound in front of a mirror. Through the mirror, he sees Selam drying her clothes. He stops and watches her. She sees him without his beard. She approaches him, smiling. Abraham is elegantly dressed and going to his meeting. His mother is proud to see him cleaned up. Selam tells the mother that Abraham will certainly bring home a girl like herself. The mother retorts that her son is too good and proud to date a girl like Selam. Selam questions Abraham's mother to find out why he is so tough. The mother tells her that Abraham inherited his severity from his father. She tells her that Abraham's father was also like his son in his earlier age, and that time softened him up. Selam remarks that Abraham is a dictator, who does not have a sense of humor.



**Selam is beaten by the policemen** Selam and her gang are drinking and talking in the local bar. Two policemen enter and order the bar-owner to turn off the music. They recognize Selam as the woman that had them beaten by Abraham. They order her out. All the clients in the bar stand up in her defense. The police accuse them all of sedition and plotting against the government and promise to come back for them. Selam comes out of the bar with her friends, singing. They hug and bid her goodbye. The two policemen are waiting for her in the dark. As soon as Selam's friends turn the corner, the policemen grab her and beat her up. Selam comes home all bruised and screaming. She accuses Abraham of being responsible for the police beating her.



**Selam is sick** In the morning, Abraham dumps a bucket of water on Selam to wake her up. This time, she screams but remains in bed. Abraham waits for her outside, but she does not show. Abraham's mother is worried and forces Selam's door open. The mother comes out crying that Selam is extremely sick, and she urges Abraham to call a taxi to take her to the hospital. Selam is rushed to the hospital and kept on constant watch. Abraham and his mother wait anxiously for her to get better. Abraham sits by Selam's bed and moralizes her about drinking. He tells her that alcohol will kill her, and that people who drink alcohol have no dignity. Selam tells him that she was not beaten for drinking but for him beating up the police. Abraham replies that he got into a fight with the police because of her drinking.



### Abraham and Selam go out for a drink

Selam is melancholic. She will not leave her bedroom. Abraham brings her some fruit to cheer her up and suggests that they go out for a few drinks. She jumps to her feet. Abraham and Selam are returning home. Selam asks Abraham to walk faster lest they should miss the curfew. He tells her to fear nothing for she is with him, and he is there for her. She moves tenderly towards him and tells him that he is the first man to tell her that he is there for her. He retorts that alcohol makes people go crazy. Selam asks Abraham to sing for her. He starts singing the national anthem. Selam and Abraham enter the compound. His mother and father have stayed up to see him return, and now they withdraw to their bedroom. Selam withdraws to her room. She comes out later for a pitcher of water and surprises Abraham seated in the dark, crying. She goes to her bed and cries, too.



### I am a teacher, a soldier

Selam is walking with her friends. She sees Abraham and starts running to him, hailing him. Abraham asks Selam what she does for a living. She tells him that, like him, she is a soldier, whose job is to make good citizens out of the country's children. Abraham asks her if a drunk is a good model for children. She tells him that he does not know anything about her. She explains that she and the people he saw in the bar are educated people who came back from Cuba to change their country, and who have been drowning their disillusionment in alcohol because their country has never given them a chance to serve it. Abraham tells her that a soldier must never retreat.



### Eschu is jealous

Eschu has decided that today is the day he will declare his love to Selam. His friends encourage him to make the move. Selam's friends are surprised to see her come into the bar accompanied by Abraham. She invites them to join Abraham and her. Abraham orders some food and drinks. He urges Selam to eat, and he feeds her a handful of *injera* bread. Eschu gets up and leaves, but the party carries on without him. You won't know if you don't tell her. Eschu is brooding. His friend tells him that Abraham's feeding Selam does not mean anything. He tells him that if he wants to know where Selam's heart is he must tell her that he loves her.



### Eschu is heartbroken

Selam is drinking with her friends. She wants to know why Eschu, the electrician, is not among them today. The bar owner tells her that he gave away his favorite radio to pay off his debt and moved on. One of the friends suggests that Eschu has a broken heart. Selam understands that he was in love with her. She comes home drunk, singing that one must be able to know when one is loved by someone.



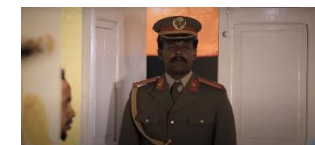
### New year

It is the new year. The mother purifies the compound by burning incense. She bakes a big loaf of bread for the occasion, which the father slices for the family. Selam observes her for a while and withdraws into her room. Abraham has come to join his parents in the compound. Children from the neighborhood come to sing and wish the family a happy new year. Abraham's mother tells the children to go sing at Selam's door. Selam invites the children into her room. They sing and dance together, and Selam offers them paper flowers. The family rewards the children with pieces of bread. The children thank them and move on to another compound.



### New Year's celebration

Abraham paces the compound. Selam is celebrating the new year with her friends in the bar. There are some soldiers celebrating, too. She is dancing to the sound of Cuban music, and one of the revelers, a woman, comes to her and tells her that she likes the freedom in her movements. Selam and the woman dance for a moment. Later, when she is dancing with some soldiers, Selam sees Abraham sitting at a table, watching her. The soldiers dancing with Selam stand still when they see him. Abraham walks towards Selam, grabs her hand, and pulls her to himself.



**Let's go home** Selam pulls away from Abraham and exits the bar. He follows her outside and orders her to go home with him. She tells him that she has come to dance and will dance. She tells him that he was distant with her yesterday, and there are people who are friendly to her and waiting for her in the bar. She tries to go around him. He restrains her and threatens her, saying that she will not be allowed back in the house if she stays out tonight. Selam walks closer to Abraham, and looking at him defiantly. She tells him that she does not care about his house and will be leaving for good. Abraham grabs Selam's head and tries to kiss her. She screams and pulls away. Then she comes back and slaps him. Abraham grabs Selam again, pins her against a wall, and kisses her. She responds by putting her arms around his neck. Their kiss coincides with the fireworks announcing the new year. Selam and Abraham spend the night together at a hotel. Selam returns home late in the day. The mother asks her if her new habit is to sleep out and then asks where she left her son. Selam is visibly taken aback by the question. She replies that Abraham told her to enter the compound first, and that he will be following soon. The mother is visibly pleased to hear that her son and Selam spent the night together.



**Abraham gets back his job** Abraham's superior informs him that he will be getting his job back tomorrow. His mother worries that the military is taking her son away from her again. Abraham packs his things. He gets out and looks at Selam's door. She is in the bar with her friends. She has come to bid them farewell. She tells them that she is no longer drinking. She hugs them and leaves.



**Selam is heartbroken** Selam and Abraham are sitting in a park, enjoying nature and talking. Abraham talks of his desire to protect his country's borders by going to the battlefield. Selam begs Abraham not to go to war. She tells him that people are just being manipulated, and that there are no winners in this war. Selam returns to her friends crying. She tells them that she loves Abraham and does not want him to leave her, like her father, who was a soldier, once did. She tells her friends that she only felt at home in Ethiopia when Abraham fell in love with her, and that his hugs make her feel like she has a family. Selam goes back to drinking.



**Abraham leaves** Selam tries to prevent Abraham from leaving. She tells him that she loves him. Abraham pushes Selam violently, asking her to stop embarrassing him. She falls on the ground, and he gets in the jeep awaiting him and leaves. Selam is inconsolable. Abraham's mother and her friend try to comfort her.



**Eschu leaves too** Eschu, too, tells his mother that he is leaving to fight for his country. His mother begs him not to leave her alone. Selam asks Abraham's mother how she could bear watching her son go to war when she knows he might never come back. The mother replies that she wants him to be a hero and to send victory to his country. Selam tells the mother that there is no victor or vanquished in wars, especially in wars fought by children of the same country.

**Love can end wars** Selam asks the mother if there is a solution to wars. She replies that love is, but that unfortunately people are too overtaken by their desire to give love a chance. Selam promises her that she will give love a chance and stop drinking. And that for Abraham, she will choose love over alcohol. The war is tearing us apart. Another one of Selam's friends, who went to medical school in Cuba, and who has been unemployed since his return, decides to enlist in the army. Selam remarks that the war is tearing them all apart. She promises not to make the mistake of falling in love again in a time of war.

**Bed and battlefield** It is raining hard and Selam is in bed. The thunder cracks like gunfire and wakes her. She sits up and breathes heavily. Then, she lets herself fall on the bed and tries to go back to sleep. On the battlefield, Abraham is reliving the moments he spent with Selam.



**My cousin is on the other side** Some soldiers are joking. One of them tells his brothers-in-arms that he would like to join the opposite side. He tells them that his cousin is fighting on the other side and before shooting at any soldier, they should let him verify that it is not his cousin. His companions laugh. Abraham calls the soldiers to attention. Gunfire erupts from the enemies' side, and the soldiers scatter for shelter. The joking soldier is hit and dies.



**Fighting to unite Ethiopia** Abraham shoots and kills the commander of the opposing faction. Before dying, the man pulls an Ethiopian flag from his pocket, gives it to Abraham, and tells him to make sure that his children get the flag and understand that he died fighting for a united Ethiopia.



**Eschu is a hero** The radio announces that Abraham's side has lost the war to the rebels. Eschu, the electrician, is part of the winning side. He is celebrated as a hero.



**Abraham is wounded** Abraham's mother finds her son in a military hospital. Selam is there to see him, too. The mother lifts Abraham's blanket and is shocked. Abraham has lost both his legs.



**Selam is pregnant** Selam cries and tells Abraham that she is glad he is alive. She mutters that she is carrying his child. Abraham stretches out his hand and touches Selam's stomach. Selam leans over and kisses him and tells him that he will be ok.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**SELAM** 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.

*Melancholic* Selam is a melancholic young woman, who tries to drown her sorrow in alcohol. Sent to Cuba by the Ethiopian government to pursue her studies, she returned home and can find no job. She rents a small bedroom with a family, but she does not have the means to afford her rent and has not paid for months. She feels abandoned by her country and irrelevant. With a group of friends, all former graduates who went to Cuba, she spends her time drinking at a local bar. When asked where home is, she replies that it is Cuba, because there, at least, she was valued.

*Lonely* When, lying on the grass with Selam, Abraham promises the young woman that he will always be there to protect her from the wicked. She tells him that for the first time she feels loved and at home in Ethiopia. Indeed, Selam's friends only give her temporary solace. After the bar, she always comes home feeling helpless and depressed. Despite the many friends who surround her and with whom she spends her days in the bar, Selam's situation shows that it is possible to be alone even in the midst of a happy, lively crowd. What Selam needs to break out of her isolation is a man with whom she could look in the same direction. Abraham becomes that man for a short while, before he leaves her for the front.

*Supportive* Selam is a caring friend to her Cuba companions. She often pawns or sell her jewelry to buy them drinks in the bar where they meet to support each other. She also supports Abraham's mother by running errands for the old woman or by helping her with the housework. In fact, she almost got electrocuted by trying to help Abraham's father fix some electric wires. At the end of the film, she tells Abraham, whose legs have been amputated, not to worry and that she will be by his side.



**ABRAHAM** 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.

*Serious* Abraham is a rigid man. An army commander by profession, he always projects an air of military severity both in his physical appearance and in the way he speaks. His gait is martial, his conversations are brief and his words are monosyllabic. Even when he decides to serenade Selam, the only song that he can think of is the national anthem, which he performs for her with comic stiffness. The only time in the film we see Abraham relaxed is when he's lying on the grass with Selam. However, this relaxation doesn't last long, and soon Abraham is back to his aloof soldier ways, shielding himself from Selam's tenderness and affection.

*Proud* Abraham has been accused of treason and imprisoned for it, an accusation he perceives as a stain on his reputation. After his release on bail, he becomes obsessed with restoring his good name by performing an act of heroism for his country: going to war against the anti-revolutionaries and scoring military victories for the Derg regime. This obsession blinds him to everything, especially the love of his parents and that of Selma, who begs him to stay with her rather than join the front. Abraham listens to his pride and goes to war. But he returns with both legs amputated. And only then does he realize the love he has neglected.

*Violent* Abraham is a brutal man. Adhering to a severe military belief, he is convinced that all issues can be resolved by way of force. He beats the soldiers who harass Selam, while a stern warning from him (a commander) would have sufficed to keep them off the young woman. He wakes Selam up by throwing bucketful of cold water on her. He drags her out of her bed, beats her up, and tries to tie up her hands. And the day he decided to go to war, as Selam comes begging him and asking him to stay with her, he violently pushes her to the ground, calls her a drunk, and leaves.

**ABRAHAM'S MOTHER** 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.

*Empathic* Even though Selam came to her place as a renter, Abraham's mother took the young woman in as her daughter. Selam has never been able to pay her rent. It does not matter to the old woman, who lodges and feeds her for free, accepting her antics despite the neighbors' disapproval. When, fed up with Selam's drunkenness and boisterous ways, Abraham throws her out of his family's home, the mother pleads with her son to go fetch Selam, telling him that the young woman's drinking habit is caused by her being lonely and misunderstood.

*Stoic* Abraham's mother resents wars. She tells Selam that if people would give love a chance, there would be no wars in the world, and thus, less suffering. She wants her son to stay home with her instead of going to fight in a war from which he might never come back. Yet, she accepts his decision to go with great patience. When Selam asks her why, she tells the young woman that her son chose to go fight and come back as a hero for his country, and she supports his decision. She sheds no tears about her son leaving her until he comes back amputated.

## THEMES

### Love

*Love as answer* 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 foot 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 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 mediates that satisfaction.

**Work vs unemployment** Work has a fulfilling impact on those who are able to get a job. For those who are unemployed, the lack of a job is depressing. The young Ethiopian graduates that came from Cuba either as teachers, doctors, electricians, or journalists, and of whom Selam's gang is representative, did not find the jobs they were promised upon their return. Their feeling of irrelevance and worthlessness drove them to alcohol. They spent their days in the local bar drinking and ruminating against the political system. For Selam, her depression coupled with heavy drinking, bordering on alcoholism. She became the talk of the town, and mothers would cover their daughters' eyes whenever she passed by. Abraham told her that she was not a role model for the children she wanted to lead to advancement as future citizens of Ethiopia. As the country drove deeper into war, it seems like the only uplifting jobs were those related to the military, and, thus, that only a military job would be gratifying. Abraham commanded respect in his neighborhood. Passers-by would remove their hats and lower their heads at his passage. The rank-and-file soldiers abused the intellectuals and devalued them, making them lose their self-esteem. The unemployed doctor of Selam's group decided to join the army to feel useful. Similarly, Eschu, who had been waiting in vain for a job to come to him from the government concluded that his validation can only come through his joining the army. Therefore, Eschu joined the army over his mother's grief. He went to the battlefield, fought against Abraham's troops, and came back victorious. On the day the guerilla groups captured Addis Ababa, Eschu was celebrated as a hero. The job Eschu could not get in his civilian life to fulfil himself in the eyes of society, he obtained it in the military

**Friendship** 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.

### **Shame vs Honor**

**Shame** 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.

**Home** 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**

**War and waste** 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 of 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**

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, too, 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 the attending jeep, leaving her crying on the ground. Selam and Abraham both get their quests fulfilled, though in a tragic way: Abraham comes 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 of pain and joy. They have found each other and love. Abraham, who once vowed that he would die for his country,