

# Literariness in Ge'ez Hagiographies: Figurative Languages and Literary Techniques in Focuss

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## *Abstract*

*The general objective of this study is to investigate literary features in medieval Ethiopian hagiographies, Gädlä Krestos Sämra in focus. It intended to endorse whether these text qualifies literariness. Accordingly, the literary elements (style) and techniques were examined in the hagiography. Since the study is done on a text, qualitative research method is applied. This research developed key findings. The results show that Gädlä Krestos Sämra has contained literary features. Stylistically, the narrative is constructed in well-arranged figures of speech, simile, metaphor, symbolism, and others. Techniques of a novel, foreshadowing, dialogue and description are on the other hand revealed in the text through the study. The principal conclusion drawn from this research was that irrespective of the reality of the stories for followers, it qualifies the prominent literary features. Based on the finding of the research, it can be argued that the text is a religious fiction.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Ethiopian written literature up to mid 19<sup>th</sup> c was predominantly Ge'ez Christian literature. Based on the question of originality this literature can be classified in to three categories. The first are translations from other languages, Second, neither translation nor original i.e. adaptations, and third, entirely indigenous. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century a variety of hand writing materials like stone, metal, clay and wood were used (Sergew 1981). According to Bender (1976), Ge'ez has a number of ancient inscriptions written on stone by Aksum kings in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D, and manuscripts that are part of ancient and medieval literature. Introduction of soft writing material were related to the coming of the nine saints to Ethiopia in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that in order to translate the holy Bible into Ethiopic, the saints required a reliable and abundant writing material, and they started manufacturing of parchment/vellum (Sergew 1981). During that time manuscripts are written which are “*the oldest Ethiopian manuscripts ever found are the Gospels I, II and III (Gospel of Gärima) from Enda Abba Gärima monastery*” (Uhlig and Bausi, 2007).

The language of the literary works was Geez till it was replaced by Amharic as written language in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the eend of the Ethiopian Medieval Age, Geez was a literary medium. Ge'ez is still the language of the liturgy, long after it ceased to be a vernacular language. It was only during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was replaced as the main medium for writing and documentation outside the church (Appleyard 1998). For Getachew (2005), When in the first half of the fourth century

Christianity reached<sup>1</sup> the country, the latter was ready to receive its teaching in writing which marked the beginning and subsequent fortunes of Ge'ez literature. As to him again this situation is one of the most peculiar features of Ethiopian civilization.

Translation of the Holy Scriptures is among the major literary achievement of Ge'ez literature. For Adamu and Belaynesh (1970), this great undertaking, in the earliest period of Geez literature, was the work of a group of learned Syrian monks known as the Nine Saints who came to Ethiopia in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The reign of the Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434-1468) was notable for the development of literary activity. Kings Zara Yaqob and Na'od were particularly noted for their considerable scholarship, and they were the authors of a number of important original compositions in the Ethiopic language. Many translations from Arabic, and numerous original Ge'ez works dated from that period (Taddese Tamerat, 1970).

In Geez language, many classical works were recorded even writings that are lost from the rest of the world, the complete texts of book of Enoch, Jubilees, *Ezra Sutu'el* and ascension of Isaiah are found only in Ge'ez manuscripts of the Ethiopian Church (Gezahegn, 2000). Geez literature also attempts to incorporate secular writings: *"In Ge'ez, quite a good number of indigenous original manuscripts have been written. These include many historical, theological, philosophical and political works. In addition to this, some other non-Christian works were written, the writings of Zara Yaqob are examples"* (Harden 1926:19). Most Ge'ez literature is religious but some texts also cover a range of secular subjects among which are astrology, philosophy, medicine, history, law, mathematics, and royal chronicles (Bender, 1976). The period when the great author and king Zara Yaqob, the renown writer Abba Giorgis of Gasecca, and many others live is commonly termed as the 'golden age' of Ethiopian literature. Accounts of the Acts (*güdl*) of Ethiopian Saints also commenced to flourish from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and continued until the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. The period is also distinguished by a large body of hagiographical writings and a long tradition of secular history writing in the form of numerous royal chronicles, which are together such a valuable source of mediaeval history. Amsalu Aklilu (1976 E.C), in his unpublished work states, in the 14th century, books started to be written-mostly religious in translation. The texts were translated by the initiation of the monk Abune Selama. As to other indications, numbers of indigenous works were produced, in addition to the translated and adapted ones. Bausi (2007), for that matter says, "Literary productions of this period are not translations but in much amount indigenous works written by Ethiopians much amount indigenous works written by Ethiopians". The 'golden age' and classical period of Ethiopic literature extends from the beginning of the 14th century to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. From the end of the 13th century a new expansion is found in literature.

Hagiographies, that provide historical, social, political, and other information as well as inspirational stories and legends, and which are the concerned areas of this study, were the notable literary products of medieval time. Hagiographies, among the various genres of Ge'ez literature, are one of the most prominent works, in the history of Ethiopian literature. Taddese (1970) states, "the large collection of hagiographical traditions was those about medieval Ethiopian saints who actually lived between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. These three centuries saw the revival... and led to an intensive literary development". Hence, most of the indigenous hagiographies were begun to write in the medieval period by indigenous hagiographers. Most Ge'ez literature is religious but some texts also cover a range of secular subjects among which are astrology, philosophy, medicine, history, law, mathematics, and royal

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity arrived in Ethiopia not in the 4<sup>th</sup> c but in the 1<sup>st</sup> c (34 A.D). In the 4<sup>th</sup> c, in the reign of Ezana, it became state religion.

chronicles of some emperors (Bender, 1976). In addition to this, some other non-Christian works were written; the writings of Zara Ya'iqob are examples (Harden 1926).

Hagiographies are highly pronounced in the medieval Ethiopia, “especially after the 13<sup>th</sup> century such kind of writings (hagiographic) had been expanded” (Bausi, 2007). The thriving of hagiographic works are the known features in medieval Ethiopia. Hagiographies which are writings that narrate and celebrate the lives of men and women saints encompass one of the major literary genres in Ethiopic literature of the Middle Ages. Hundreds of hagiographical texts both local and translated ones survive from this long period, a vast body of potential source material for the history and culture of the Medieval Ethiopian Orthodox church in particular and the country's as a whole. The period's literature is chiefly “rich in hagiographies”, and hagiographical traditions and royal chronicles were flourished in this Medieval Ages” (Adamu and Belaynesh, 1970).

Taddese (1970) states, “*the large collection of hagiographical traditions was those about medieval Ethiopian saints who actually lived between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. These three centuries saw the revival... and led to an intensive literary development*”. Hence, most of the indigenous hagiographies were begun to write in the medieval period by indigenous hagiographers. Taddesse Tamrat (1970) continues, “*hagiographies consisted of the acts of the martyrs (Gädlä sämäetat), acts of the saints (Gädlä sadqan) and the deeds of the Holy Angels (Därsanä Mälaäkt); all of these constituted similar compositions of hagiographical tradition*”. Hagiographies are works that celebrate the lives and acts of saints. The Ge'ez counterpart for such writings is 'Gädl' which, according to its root meaning, has the signification of 'conflict or struggle'. Ferec (1985), defines hagiography from its root as “the Latin word 'acta' is synonymous both with the Ge'ez 'Gädl' and the Greek 'Hagios'. 'Hagios' in Greek means 'holy' while 'graphein' means 'to write'. When they are put together they mean book which deals with “saints, their lives and the honor shown to them.”

The church of Ethiopia, in its churches and monasteries is the storehouse of Ethiopic literature, and contributes a lot to the development of the national literary tradition and art. Ethiopian men of letters, in almost all cases, also were men of the Church, and the vast collections of manuscripts are still preserved in the Ethiopian monasteries and churches (Bender, 1976, Adamu and Belaynesh, 1970). From classical times till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of Ethiopian literatures were composed of Ethiopian Christian literature. These Christian literatures which belonged to the Ethiopian church are Gädlat (hagiographies), Tä'ammərat (miracle books), Därsanat (homilies), Mälkä' (a type of poetry), and others, that are mostly written to honor and respect the saints of the church. The writers of such books were scholars of the Ethiopian church. Likewise, Zena Mewael (chronicle) of royal kings was another dimension of the earliest writing tradition. There are spiritual books found in the church which are written in a fictional way whose aim is to enhance believer's devotion towards the Christian world. When we take the Gädlat, Därsanat, and Tä'ammərat they are prepared in the form of short and long fictions.

In the history of European literature, spiritual literatures, especially the Bible, is believed to be “the true foundation of the modern novel” (Hammond 1983, as cited in Anteneh, 1993). Although it is not supported by deliberate and adequate research, this same literature is also believed to be the foundation of Amharic literature (Anteneh, 1993). Many scholars, foreign and Ethiopian, assume that religious literature which is predominantly in Gə'əz is the source of modern Amharic literature. Talbot says: “apart from its religious significance, the 'authorical version' of the Amharic Bible may well have a literary influence analogous to that felt in England ever since 1611” (1955, as cited in Anteneh, 1993). Molvaer (1980) claims that “Many authors have attended church schools, and much of Amharic literature has benefited

from this influence". Yohannes (1966), Debebe (1974), Kane (1975), Molvaer (1996), Amsalu (1976) and others seem to have similar views regarding the influences.

Hagiographies are the richest sources of study in various fields. They are highly essential in the study of Ethiopian history, politics, and philosophy, especially of the medieval age. In the field of literature hagiographies are also huge sources of study. Even though hagiographies are rich enough for literary studies, and "researchers like Job Ludolff started to study Gə'əz literature at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century" (Amsalu, 1976 E.C), and it "has considerable wealth both in the contexts of Ethiopian and world literature" (Gezahegn, 2000); there are no as such adequate attempts to do literary research on the area.

Those who take the scheme to carry out research on these texts are not mostly from the literary perspective but from their historical, philological, theological, philosophical or political contents. The literary value has not been given considerable attention. Very few studies are done on the department of English literature on Ethiopian hagiographies. Therefore, the study of Gə'əz literature is waiting for researchers to be explored by researchers; this one is intended to be one of that. On the other hand, some foreign and indigenous scholars such as Hayatt, Ullendorf, Harden and Amsalu have claimed that Ethiopian hagiographies are devoid of literary qualities. Some overseas scholars have also tried to study the literature, but most of their statements, are exposed to hasty generalizations. Expatriate scholars who studied Gə'əz literature have disparaged it by stating that it lacks literary qualities (Harden 1926); (Hayatt, 1928). Still worse, for Ullendorf (1945), the country lacks "great poets and writers". Hence, for the above expatriate scholars, the country does not have literature with literary qualities. Thus, the researcher was initiated to explore the literary qualities of Ethiopian hagiographies.

The main objective of conducting the research is to analyze and verify whether the medieval Ethiopian hagiographies have literary features (generic elements of a novel). The following are some specific aims. The final result of this research can be beneficial in exposing classical Ethiopian literature. After the findings, one can speak out that Ethiopian had the tradition of literary (fictional) writings centuries ago. Here, the researcher attempts to see the literary beauty of *Gädlä Krestos Sämra*.

Data sources can be classified as primary and secondary sources of data. A primary source of data in this regard is the hagiography intended to be subject of the research. Accordingly, primary data are gathered from this primary text. The secondary sources on the other hand, are written books that are utilized as a source, particularly for review of previous researches and conceptual framework. The researcher, consequently, employs textual analysis through descriptive (qualitative) research method. The researcher carried out a textual analysis. In analyzing the data, generic features of a fiction, style (figurative languages) and literary techniques (Flashback, foreshadowing, description and dialogue) have been explored. Evaluating the aforementioned narrative through those fictional elements, the researcher appraises the text's literary qualities. In the entire thesis, the researcher demonstrates some literary features of Ethiopian hagiographies with special reference to *Gädlä Krestos Sämra*. Through the process of the study, the researcher explores whether the hagiography has literary quality.

## 2. FIGURES OF SPEECH IN *GÄDLÄ KRESTOS SÄMRA*

### 1. Simile

This is a kind of figures of speech that presents things, ideas, behaviors, actions, etc, through comparison. In *Gädlä Krestos Sämra*, actions are presented using the connectors of simile those are "As", "Like", and





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*Then when finished telling the message which sent from God, orders her to take a wheat that is full of a church. Then she immediately answers: "It is nothing for me, I won't the joy and respect of this world, and even I don't have a store to keep it. Oh my Lord, please don't give me the prestige of this world." He reacts back and says: "this is not wheat that grows up from earth to be human consumption, rather symbolizes the soul of human being. As the Lord in the Gospel says 'I assuredly say you that if a single seed of wheat is not laid in to a land, will lives lonely ingrown, but after agricultural process, fruits many double'" (P. 94-95)*

As vividly written in the excerpt above, the wheat signifies human soul. As a person could get raised in the time of mass resurrection, after death, a piece of wheat also got risen after death through agricultural process. On the other hand, the wheat which the saint sees in revelation is very much i.e. full of a church. This implies her disciples, and those who believe in the prayer and mediation of Krestos Sämra that would be countless in number. In the beginning, I said wheat signifies a soul. Therefore, it also represents the souls that would be leaded by Krestos Sämra in to paradise from living under a satanic rule.

**Web**

A web that uses to capture fishes symbolizes the protagonist Krestos Sämra. As a web captures fish in a sea, the saint captures the souls of sinner people in a hell and leads them in to paradise through miracles.

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*Again listen to me, I tell you that the web which uses to capture fishes signifies you. Those who represented in fishes are your children who will born in water and the Holy Spirit and will trusted in your intercession and prayer, listening to the acts you was spent at earth. (P. 98)*

The extract exposes that the web signifies the protagonist and the fishes stand for her followers.

**Lamb**

These white lambs symbolize joyful children. The lambs are observed enjoying at a field.

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*Then after, she saw white lambs that enjoy in the field feeding their mother's breast milk, and she became very wonder of what she saw; she loves them because they are very beautiful. (P. 99)*

In actual world, white represents joy, a fantastic and bright future fate. Lamb on the other hand, reflects hope, since a lamb is little, it waits for a coming hopeful future. Hopeful futurity and joy is therefore

symbolized by the lambs. The little lambs, as to the excerpt, reveal the little children that were sacrificed at earth and enjoying at heaven with Kiriakos the little. The symbol is not donned here, but it also indicates the protagonist's future joy at the kingdom of heaven; for the reason the protagonist fights more and more seeking a hopeful future reward.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF LITERARY TECHNIQUES

##### 1. Dialogue

The story is narrated in third person point view. Although the narrator presents the story in third person pronouns, the characters are make a dialogue; these dialogues give the narrative fictional quality.

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*At that time she quickly goes` to the church and prays to God in a deepest sorrow and mourn for this guy. By the time, the Lord Jesus Christ come and says:*

*“My dear Krestos Sämra, what makes you sorrow?”*

*“I’m here with grand sorrow and tear to beg you a mercy for a sinner Ma’eqebe Egzi” says Krestos Sämra.*

*The Lord says then:*

*“He is the one who never earns a mercy, because listening to the advice of Satan, he denounces me and trusted in a magic.”*

*Immediate after he has finished the speech, she bowed down into his leg and strictly begs him as:*

*“Oh my creator! This magic plant is created by you, and you have a power to demolish it and save him, nothing is impossible to you, and your mercy is grateful than that of your devastation....” (P. 54-56)*

This is a long dialogue made between Krestos Sämra and Jesus Christ and then Ma’eqebe Egzi’e. In the dialogue made between these three characters, Ma’eqebe Egzi speaks to the protagonist to negotiate him with God. Then a dialogue is processed between Krestos Sämra and Jesus concerning Ma’eqebe Egzi; the dialogue ends with the speech of the protagonist and Ma’eqebe Egzi that she announces him the mercy.

The dialogue, extracted above, adds a fantastic aesthetic grace for the narrative. Again such kind of dialogues, in a story, gives a literary beauty. We gain an opportunity to notice about the characters’ feeling, aim, problems and psychological beings.

Participant characters internal and external relations, issues of discussion, the level and kinds of their thinking, and one character’s view towards others, are observed through this dialogue. This technique, dialogue, is tied with characters personal truths and experiences, that it enables the reader to have a clear understanding about the events of the narrative, and to develop and proceed the incidents within it.

From pages 82 to 84 of the text founds another exemplary dialogue that the protagonist makes with St. Michael on the one side, and Satan on the other. Krestos Sämra once a time sees a group of men standing on their sides. One among them who stands apart makes a laugh, at this moment Krestos Sämra asks St. Michael to make the secret apparent that why the one laughs apart from others. The Angel responds back as she can ask himself who laughs alone. But, that man who stop apart make the protagonist frustrate while she attempts to question him. This is a typical dialogue. It adds a certain beauty; readers consider themselves that they were there through imagination while following the event in a third person narrator.

This is a special occasion for the audience that the characters gain an opportunity to react face to face. Such kinds of occasions can develop the story; pay a contribution for the future progress of the story. The dialogue makes the reader to have a friendly reaction with characters. Additionally, it draws a picture on one’s mind about the actions and becomes plausible. The dialogue is not happened for the sake of dialogue only, rather it closely organizes with the plot and story, and has part for the overall interaction of the good flow of the narratives story and characterization. It also has a role to show the personality of characters. Furthermore, the dialogue which is a conversation in a literary work, in this interaction uses to reveal characters and to advance the plot.

It moves the action along in the narrative and it also helps to characterize the personality of the characters. It also gives the story a more natural, conversational in flow, which makes it more readable and literarily enjoyable. These dialogues prevent the narrative from being nothing more than a list of descriptions and actions by showcasing human interaction.

## 2. Description

Using this literary technique, the narrator describes the dressing, physical appearance, feeling, and facial view of the characters of the story. Moreover, the figurative presentation of the weather, atmosphere, and the physical environment that the characters move on assures the credibility of the story.

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*Again she saw very huge planets which are exceedingly clean and brightest; they are lighter than that of the sun, and of the moon and of the stars. Inside them, there are fruits and flowers which named 'plant of Elijah' that are very pleasant to see. ... Inside these planets, there are lemon and other plants in which their fruits make one sensational. Inside these planets, there flow white spring of milk. ... Inside these planet, there flow tasty spring of honey.*  
 (P. 100-101)

It is an amazing description about a certain realm which differs from this Universe. The description has a power to draw a picture into our mind. It makes us to easily imagine that fantasy realm. We find splendid description about the planets, flowers, fruits, atmosphere and general physical environment of the country which the protagonist sees in revelation. There also scrutinize a repetition for emphasis which adds more beauty for the literary quality of the text.

Capturing an event through descriptive presentation involves paying close attention to the details by using all of the five senses. Such kind of “showing writing” is a writing that describes the protagonist character, the place and event in great detail, with sensational presentation.

Below is also another excerpt which indicates an imaginative power of the narrator/author, being presented in a marvelous description.

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*By that time, when she looks down, she saw twelve planets of winds. Among them the four are winds for mercy and the rest eight winds for devastation. Above the twelve planets of wind, founds seven planets of water; above the seven planets of water, founds seven planets of earth; above the seven planets of earth, founds the seven planets of heaven;... the cherub seen carried the throne. Surrounding the throne stands the twenty four clergies of heaven being in the four directions. Our mother Krestos Samra sees those clergies of heaven standing, six in the North, six in the South, six in the West, six in the East. ...* (P. 102-104)

In addition to describing the physical environment, this imaginary description gives some know how about the general context of the narrative. Through this description one goes from one spot to the other in imagination; visits the fantasy realm sitting at a given place. Such kinds of imagination add a literary

value for a piece of literature. The extract draws an image for an audience about twelve planets which are out of this planet.

The writer uses a lot of flowery adjectives and adverbs to describe what is going on or how something appears. He again indulges us in a different world by using descriptive writing that paints a vivid picture



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*When she closes to Dabra Libanos, cuts her hair in a blade, put off her clothes and distributes to poor, and gives alms the entire many she possess. (P. 44)*

Hair, particularly for women, in a religious sense, is a symbol of prettiness or beauty. Female's beauty and gorgeousness are tied with her hair. In the extract the protagonist cuts her hair down. This indicates how she ignores the beauty and joys of this world and makes herself ready for those countless fights which comes future. She replaces her dressing in to monastic attires. This foreshadows how the protagonist becomes ready for future challenges, and commitments. The extracts presented above are foretold events that foreshadow the whole incidents happen throughout the narrative; hinting at events to occur later.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Amare Mammo (1968:17) declares about the nature of creative writings that they are constructed in two different ways. "The first one is a kind of writing that makes its base on a true story. The rest, on the other side, is solely fictional, ideal, commonly considered as work of creativity." This general definition of Amare provokes me to lay Ethiopic hagiographies, particularly *Gädla Krestos Sämra* into the first side; a fictional writing made its base on a true story. Consequently, based on the findings made in the entire body of the study, *Gädla Krestos Sämra* is written in a fictional quality. It fits the first definition that the *gädl* is written in a fictional manner having religious essentials and the saint's experience and facts as a base. The rational that enables to conclude that 'it is fictional' is the literary standards that the *gädl* got hold of. The hagiographies are well composed and arranged in a range of literary features, and are rich in literariness. As a literary work should contain story, the narrative *Gädla Krestos Sämra* has a sense controller story. It is not only a raw story, but sensational through the various aspects of a plot. The plot of *Gädla Krestos Sämra* is inspirational. It is constructed keeping the Gustav Freytag's triangular model for plot structure. A reader with a literary insight founds all components of the plot, obviously together with well-to-do characterization, setting, point of view and theme. Figures of speech, one component in story's style, shine across the text. The author uses different forms of expressions through figures of speech like simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and symbols that are departed from normal language in order to create fantastic literary effect and beauty. Through simile two things are compared using words of comparison 'like' and 'as'. Through metaphor, the author transfers an idea associated with one word to another word. Through hyperbole, extravagant statements are there for the sake of literary emphasis. Using Symbol, the author uses something that means more than what it is. Techniques of a novel are appropriately employed in the text of *Gädla Krestos Sämra*. The author gives hints or clues to indicate the outcome of the story, through the technique foreshadowing. Through description, the author also show the elevation of the imagination power employed in the narrative. Using sentimental language, the events, situations, characters, the environment, and the atmosphere are described well. There also is a dialogue between characters, which adds a value for the literary beauty of the narrative. Based on the above presentation of findings, the hagiography acquires the literary standard, and it can be said Ethiopian hagiographies have exerted substantial impacts on the country's literary thinking. Consequently, due to the literary aesthetic and beauty that these *gädlat* own, when evaluated according to the literary elements and techniques, the researcher could reach on a conclusion that Ethiopians had been the habit of literary thinking and skill centuries ago.

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