

Beneath the Lion's Gaze

By

Author Maaza Mengiste

This article introduces the dynamic & young women, a first time author Maaza Mengiste hailing from Ethiopia, through an interview. The narrative provides insights on what prompted her to write such a mind boggling novel as well as her views on the current status of women's empowerment in Ethiopia. The article also provides a brief review of the book which takes you into Ethiopia's struggle! Maaza, also talks about her new groundbreaking film *Girl Rising* which she believes will impact the girls and women from Africa. Following is the narrative of the interview:

What compelled you to write this book, did something - a personal experience influence your writing this story

I was born and a child during the early days of revolution in Ethiopia, and growing up, I had bits of memories that I didn't understand. I was aware that people were frightened, that it was dangerous to go outside at night, and our lives were changing. However, I didn't understand what was happening. It was that curiosity that led me to read history books about Ethiopia and the revolution that began in 1974. And from that great my desire to write a novel about this period. I found the stories of people's courage in the face of oppression to be inspiring and something I wanted others to know about.

What in your view point is current growth /development status in Ethiopia

I'm simply a fiction writer, not someone versed in any real way about growth and development. In my very limited perspective, what I could say is that Ethiopia's economic growth is one of the fastest in Africa. The country is continuing to change rapidly, but the

question becomes how wealth and opportunity are distributed. Like many other countries, Ethiopia has a large disparity between rich and poor.

Do you think Women have a bright future in Ethiopia or how is Women's Empowerment Status in Ethiopia

Ethiopian women are strong and their future in the country is growing brighter. They are fighting for more recognition and more rights, and though there is work to do, there is much promising work being done to improve the situation for girls and women. Education is seen as one of the strongest determinants for a better life and more organizations are working towards ensuring girl's continue in school and have great opportunities in that arena.

How will Girl Rising documentary make a difference in Africa?

GIRL RISING is a groundbreaking film, directed by Academy Award nominee Richard Robbins, which tells the stories of 9 extraordinary girls from 9 countries, written by 9 celebrated writers and narrated by 9 renowned actresses. Girl Rising showcases the strength of the human spirit and the power of education to change the world.

GIRL RISING will raise awareness of the many issues girls around the world -- from Cambodia to Egypt to Peru to Nepal and India and Sierra Leone -- face in trying to get their education. The documentary also features girls from Afghanistan and Haiti as well as Ethiopia and each of them are confronted with different obstacles, but each of them are breaking down barriers for themselves. These stories of courage and determination will speak to many, both in Africa and beyond. They will speak to anyone who has had to struggle to fulfil a goal.

Review of the book¹:

“Maaza Mengiste's novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* is a remarkable accomplishment, set in Addis Ababa during Ethiopia's darkest days in the mid-1970s, from the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie through the reign of terror imposed by the Derg, the revolutionary council that seized power in Selassie's wake. Somehow, out of this agonizing material Mengiste has created a community, and within it a family, whose passions, conflicts, and ethical dilemmas will engage even the most jaded reader.

Nevertheless, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* is an extraordinary novel, timely and vital: Its illumination of a world unfamiliar to us shows how individuals will fight to retain their humanity in the face of atrocity; discerning a glimmer of light that we ought to be utterly grateful for!”

PROFILE:



Maaza Mengiste is an Ethiopian-American writer born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and living in the United States. Her debut novel, the award-winning *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* was named one of the 10 best contemporary African books by the *Guardian*. Among

other places, her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Lettre Internationale*, *Granta*, *Callaloo Journal*, *The Granta Anthology of the African Short Story*, and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Maaza Mengiste writes fiction and nonfiction dealing with migration, the Ethiopian revolution, and the plight of sub-Saharan immigrants arriving in Europe. She is currently teaching creative writing at Princeton University and Queens College of the City University of New York.

¹ http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/016_04/4684