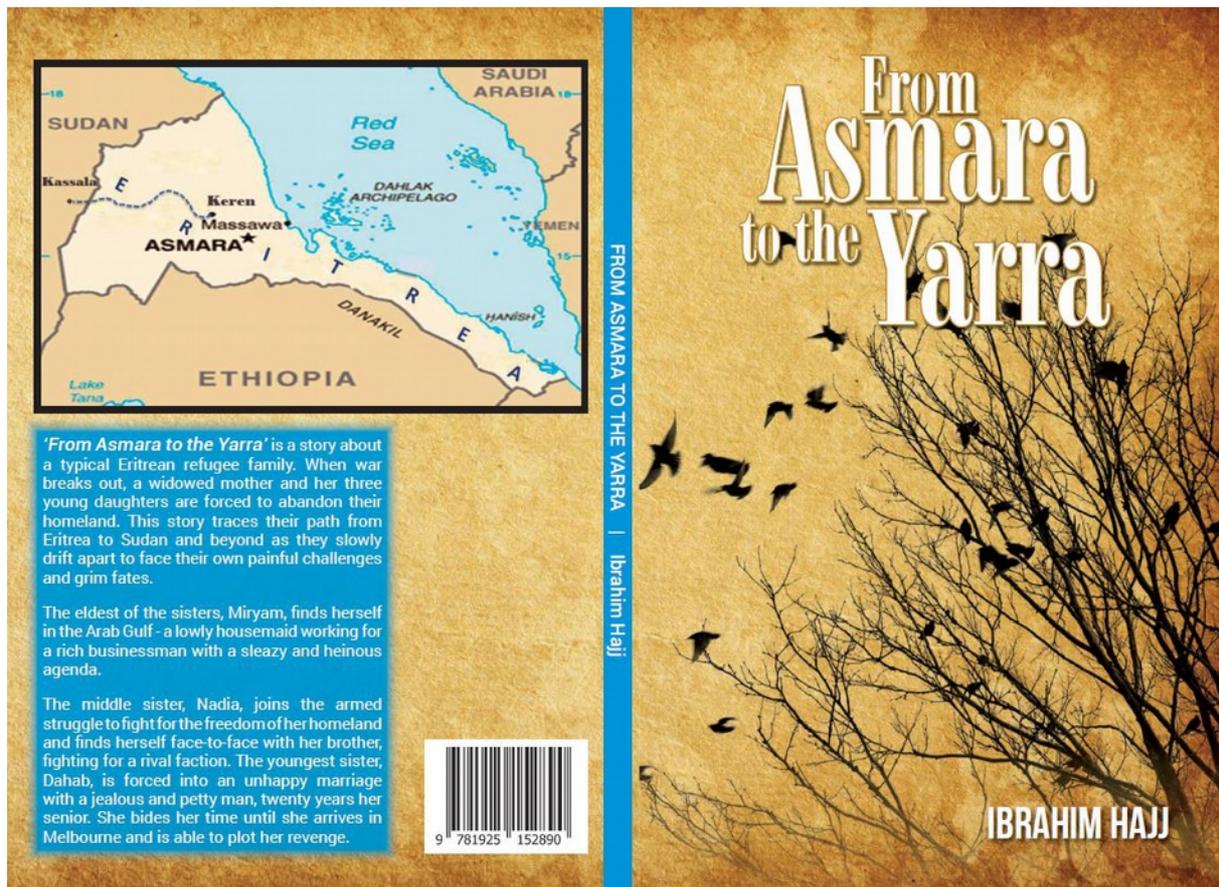


From Asmara to the Yarra



Part 1 - Everyone was waiting for the big moment, for the arrival of the bride and bridegroom to kick-start the wedding festival. The atmosphere inside the Laylati Reception was wild and chaotic. The loud music emanating from the giant loud speakers was somehow drowned out by louder, animated chats that every now and then broke into a collective laughter, reverberating across the hall that was packed to the rafters with guests. Some were on their seats and others on their feet, and in the best tradition of such occasions everyone talked to anyone who cared to listen. Jeddah's deep-rooted gender sensitivities were, to all intents and purposes, shelved away that night, as men and women had mingled freely, unfettered by that country's conservative

restrictions. And justifiably so, one might add, as it was an exclusively Eritrean wedding. By Eritreans and for Eritreans, so to speak. Nonetheless, seating arrangements inside the hall had observed gender segregation requirements, as male and female guests were seated on opposite sides, facing each other, separated by a strip of corridor that intersected the hall into two equal halves. The buffer zone separating the opposite sexes was later used as a centre stage for that night's Eritrean cultural dancing. Guests moved between tables to catch up and exchange greetings with acquaintances they hadn't seen for a long time. But they were all back to their designated tables once food began to be served.

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Amann and his son, Samee, were seated at a table close by one of the giant loudspeakers. But despite the loud and animated chats and giggles around them, Amann was able to make out the song played, as one by the legendary Osman Abdelraheem, a popular Eritrean musician in the late sixties and early seventies. "Ab ketema Mitsiwa" had been immortalised by regenerating its appeal to the younger generations, thanks to its catchy lyrics and deeply sentimental melody that recounted a unique love story that had unfolded on one of Massawa's* exhilarating beaches. Amann was overwhelmed by nostalgia, tears forming in his

eyes, as memories of his cherished childhood and school days came flooding back. Osman's song was suddenly interrupted and replaced by "Maraawee", a traditional folk song that usually accompanied the bride and bridegroom as they made their way into the wedding hall. Ironically, the song title, literally meaning "the bridegroom", tended to endorse an obsolete gender bias, as it heaped disproportionate exaltations on the bridegroom with barely a mention of that night's equal partner, namely, the bride. One would be justified to think this was a gathering to mark a triumphant comeback of a great hunter with a trophy, in this case the bride, to show for that. It was 10pm when the MC suddenly emerged on the podium, urging guests to rise to their feet to welcome the bride and bridegroom, as the couple made their way into the hall. Interestingly, the bride and bridegroom, Miryam and Omar, had arrived at the hall on time, at about 8:30pm, but had remained locked in a backroom until a sufficient number of guests had arrived and the hall was reasonably full. Time had always been an issue with the Eritreans wherever they might be. For some reason, they did not want to be the first to the

*Massawa is an Eritrean seaport along the Red Sea.

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wedding venue and so it was by plan that they turned up late, but, interestingly, not when they went for a job interview. Guests had received their invitation cards a month or so earlier, and were expected to show up by 8pm. But it was only after 9pm that people began to trickle in and was not until 10pm that all guests had been accounted for. Finally, the bride and bridegroom, Miryam and Omar, emerged through the main entrance, walking ceremoniously, hand in hand, to the centre of the hall, amid a persistent, boisterous wave of applause. The exuberant guests remained on their feet clapping and swaying to the tune of “Maraawee” until the bride and bridegroom took their seats on an elevated platform facing the guests. The wedding ceremony was in full swing. That night, no one seemed happier than the bride’s sister, Dahab, who had the privilege to be seated next to the bride and so the guests’ eyes were on her as much as on the bride. Interestingly, this was Dahab’s first public appearance, since her arrival in Jeddah a few years back, as a newly-wed. She drew attention with her disarming beauty and elegance, while her Lady Diana hairstyle had lent her an added charm. She clearly had stolen the show. Former schoolmates and friends, male and female, whom Dahab had not met for a long time, came over to where she was sitting, to say hello and to catch up. Some just shook hands with her, while others embraced her in the traditional Eritrean way, exchanging kisses on both cheeks. For her part, Dahab seemed overly pleased to be out there, catching up with

friends. Not many people knew that she had lived in Jeddah, as she had rarely appeared in public. Dahab's jealous husband, Amann, rarely allowed her to attend weddings or socialize with other people. He had boycotted all social gatherings involving a mix of men and women, mainly weddings,

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denying his wife the opportunity to meet and catch up with friends and relatives. But there was no way he could stop Dahab from attending her sister's big day, and so she made the most of that rare opportunity, much to the consternation of her husband. Dahab rarely left the dance floor, and that was because each time she headed back to her table, someone else invited her back for more dancing and she happily obliged. She loved dancing. As a student, back in Kassala†, Dahab had joined an Eritrean cultural troupe, performing musical shows as a means of luring young Eritreans to the armed struggle for the liberation of Eritrea. So while Dahab showed off her dancing skills at the centre stage, much to the admiration of the people attending the wedding, her husband, Amann, was burning with jealousy. But wary of the embarrassment that an act of recklessness on his part might cause him, Amann chose to exercise maximum self-restraint, but not for long, as he finally decided enough

was enough. So he waited for the rare moment that Dahab got back to her seat, before he walked, swiftly, up to her, dragging his son along with him and leaning to her ear, “It is time to go home, the kids are sleepy,” he whispered, trying to appear calm, while raging from inside. “We are not sleepy, dad, I like the music, we should stay longer,” his daughter, Moona, seated by her mother, protested. “Are you for real? This is my sister’s wedding. Why are you in such a hurry? It is not even midnight,” Dahab said with a sense of shock and disbelief. The bride, Miryam, was within earshot and she overheard the heated exchanges between Dahab and her husband but she opted not to interfere, keeping her indignation at Amann’s behaviour to herself.

†Kassala is a town in eastern Sudan, near the border with Eritrea, with a large number of Eritrean refugees.

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Dahab knew her husband’s motives in asking them to leave early, and she had no doubt that the children’s welfare was not his main reason. The huge age gap, twenty years, between himself and his young wife was beginning to show, and as of late he had shown signs of paranoia and excessive male possessiveness. And now seeing his young wife having a great time, chatting and exchanging smiles with young

friends, had caused his sense of jealousy to flare up, and so he decided to put an end to his miseries that night, by hustling his wife out of the place. “Are you coming along with me, or not?” Amann threatened. “Sorry, I am staying. It does not look appropriate on my part, at my sister’s wedding, to leave while everyone else is still here. Plus it is not even midnight.” Dahab said. “The bride and bridegroom are scheduled to leave at 2am, and everyone will be gone by then.” “Okay then, stay here, as long as you like,” Amann snapped, and then grabbing his two children by their arms, against their will, he walked off, heading towards his car, when he suddenly stopped. A police car siren sounded at the entrance of Laylati Reception, and soon a dozen or so policemen stormed the hall, shouting “Stop the music, stop the music.” The place was thrown into confusion. A stampede broke out as people ran towards the exits, believing they were firemen coming to their rescue from a fire or a danger of some sort. But soon it became clear what the drama was all about. “Iqama! Iqama!, (work permit! work permit!) the policemen shouted. One by one, the guests were allowed to leave after showing a valid work permit. People with no work permits or with invalid papers, had risked being deported back to their countries. But in the case of the Eritreans, they would be deported to the Sudan as they held UN refugee travel documents, issued in that country.

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Ironically, the bride and bridegroom, Miryam and Omar, happened to be the only people at the wedding who had failed to produce the required papers. Miryam tried to rationalize with the uncompromising policemen, arguing that carrying a work permit, on their wedding night, was the last thing on their minds. But she might as well have been talking to a brick wall. The gender segregation policy was at work, as the newly-wed couple were handcuffed and dumped onto the back of two separate police vans, and taken to separate cells in separate prisons, somewhere in Jeddah.

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2 As the eldest of three sisters, Miryam was always destined to be the one to make the sacrifice for the sake of the family, following their father's untimely death. The pecking order would have looked quite different had, Wahab, the eldest and only brother, not left his grieving family behind, just weeks after the death of the father, to join the armed struggle for the liberation of Eritrea. So the absence of both the father and brother had thrust Miryam to the forefront. The father's death was, understandably, a huge loss, made even worse considering he was the family's sole bread earner. And Wahab's absence at such a critical junction had

compounded the family's woes and sense of loss. In the greater scheme of things, though, the absence of a male figure in the family had opened up a new life perspective for the girls, redirecting their destiny down a path so different to that they would have followed had their father and brother been around when the girls made their transition from childhood to teenage. But destiny had its own agenda and so the father passed away, and the brother joined the armed struggle when Miryam was nine, Nadia six, and the youngest, Dahab, just five. What had started as simply a case of three sisters losing a father at an early age, had a few years later turned into a case where the absence of a male figure in the household had allowed the teenage girls an unrestrained liberal lifestyle that set in motion an

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irreversible trend that helped redefine the status of females among the conservative society, in the city of Keren*. Things were not so bad for the first few years following the father's death, as close relatives had rallied round the grieving family, extending their moral and financial support. And there was, of course, the father's meagre monthly pension from the Government. That kept the family afloat for a while. But a few years after the father's death, the benefactors, suddenly withheld their assistance to the family. That left the family

with the paltry monthly pension, forcing it to struggle to make ends meet. But no sooner had the benefactors' sources dried up, when another door opened up to the family. Miryam had emerged as the saviour. Recently, twice a week, Miryam had been coming home from school, a bit later than usual. But what worried her mother most was that each time she came home late, Miryam had handed her mother two Ethiopian dollar notes. Not a bad amount, two day's worth of groceries. But the mother was worried. Initially, the mother didn't think much of it, but when it continued, she decided to ask her daughter about the source of the unexplained income. "What is with you, Miryam, you have been coming home late from school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the last couple of weeks?" the mother confronted Miryam. "And where is this money coming from, anyway?" "Mum, I do tutoring for a fellow student from a cashed-up Yemeni family." Miryam explained. "But people are spreading rumours about your coming late," the mother said, unable to disguise her deep concern. "People can say whatever they like. But this is none of their business, mum." Miryam retorted, in a faltering voice, "and I am doing this for the family, not for myself."

*Keren is an Eritrean city, 90km to the west of Asmara.

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“But can’t you do the tutoring here, in our house?” the mother suggested without giving much thought to the practicality of her suggestion. “Mum, we need the money more than they need my tutoring,” Miryam said in a faltering voice, fighting back tears. “Besides, her family won’t let her come here in the evening.” “I am only worried about you, Miryam,” the mother said before, overwhelmed by a feeling of inadequacy and helplessness, she burst into tears. Seeing their mother crying made the girls huddle around her and they all cried in unison. The mother had no option but to go along with her daughter’s version regarding the source of the money, and so it became business as usual as Miryam continued coming back from school late, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and handed her mother the two dollar notes, which she accepted, gratefully. Growing up in a family without the traditional male domination, had proved a blessing in disguise for Miryam and her two younger sisters, as it gave them the freedom and liberty to lead their lives the way they liked. There was no father to be afraid of or an older brother to look over their shoulders, so they were in and out of their house as they pleased. In Keren’s conservative values, a friendship was strictly between boys or between girls. It was unacceptable for a girl to be seen in the company of a boy, unless he was a brother or a cousin. Miryam and her sisters broke that barrier, as they were seen talking and walking with male schoolmates to and from their high school. They even socialised with their male schoolmates, outside school hours and on weekends. And on a few occasions

Miryam had invited home some male friends. The three sisters were not deterred by the rumours and gossips which they considered a small price to pay for the freedom they had enjoyed.

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Miryam and her sisters became well-known for their liberal lifestyle in the conservative city of Keren. They soon became role models, as they encouraged other girls to break loose of the shackles of conservatism and in no time the wind of change had swept through the city of Keren. Weekend parties involving high school students, both girls and boys, became commonplace, and Keren's conservative society was gradually coming to terms with the unavoidable changing reality. But before long, those get-together parties had turned into political gatherings, as they provided a perfect disguise to discuss ways to support the armed struggle and disseminate political awareness among the youth. As a result, many young boys and girls had joined the armed struggle for freedom. Nadia had become a leading activist. Meanwhile, it was rumoured that Miryam had some sort of a relationship with Dr Kidane, a GP at Keren Hospital. The mother had met Dr Kidane only once, and that was when he came over to see her when she fell ill, and he had refused to take money for his trouble. Now she wondered, privately,

if the rumours had something to do with the two dollar notes that Miryam had brought home, each time she came home late from school. She also began to suspect that gossiping about her daughters' liberal lifestyle may have been the reason why their close relatives had all of a sudden withheld their assistance to the family. But there was not much that the mother could do. In 1974 Dr Kidane left Keren after getting a lucrative contract in Saudi Arabia. It was a huge relief to Miryam's mother.

1975 was a year of great political upheaval in Eritrea, and the situation was getting worse by the day.

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It was the time when the Eritrean fighters had grown in numbers and were better armed. As a result, they had changed their war tactics from hit-and-run into hit-and-make-the-enemy run. The Ethiopians, on the other hand, had vented their anger on the unarmed civilians. And so, every time they suffered a defeat, their retreating soldiers had roamed the countryside, pillaging and killing. Innocent civilians were shot at and killed on the streets, in broad daylight. Young boys and girls disappeared without trace. Mothers became worried when their children left home that they may not see them again. A wave of fear and terror had swept through the cities.

It was a crossroad for the young Eritreans, as they were forced to make a decision. Some had decided to join the armed struggle, some fled to the Sudan as refugees, and others took a punt and stayed in Eritrea, hoping that a sense of normality would be restored, soon. Miryam and her sisters were distraught when their mother told them they were to leave for the Sudan. Although they could see it coming, it was still a shock when it happened. Mainly because the girls had never entertained the idea that one day they would have to leave their beloved Keren, or Keren Z'aada, as its inhabitants had affectionately called it. And the girls' sense of misery and sadness was compounded by the fact that they were heading for the Sudan which they knew little about. Their exciting journey of love and romance with their beloved Keren had barely begun when cruel events threatened to cut it short. Their lives were so much interwoven with Keren, that they could not fathom life away from their much cherished city. Keren was their pride, their Paris, their Venice, their Rome. When their father died, they cried day and night, for weeks and months. They shed tears until their tears dried up and had no more

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tears to shed. If tears could ever bring a dead person back, their dad would have been the first to return. Now at this

moment of conjecture and uncertainty, they wished that their father was around. It broke their hearts and they were filled with a sense of guilt that they were leaving their father's gravesite behind. On March 22nd, 1975, they tearfully farewelled Keren and they shed tears all the way to the Sudan.

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3 On the 28th of March, 1975, the mother and her three daughters arrived in the Sudan. They had travelled through nights by the light of the moon and the stars, hiding from the Ethiopian army during the day. The fact that they had left the country illegally would have made them fair game to the Ethiopian soldiers. It would make one wince to just imagine the possible scenarios that the young girls would have found themselves in, if they crossed paths with the Ethiopian soldiers. The mother had travelled on the back of a camel, whereas her three daughters had trudged the rugged terrain all the way to Kassala, covering a distance of about 400km. Along the way, they were joined by caravans of fellow refugees. Because of its proximity to the Eritrean-Sudanese border, the Sudanese town of Kassala had become the de facto destination for most refugees from Keren, and no wonder in the years to come, Kassala had hosted more Keren people than Keren did. Their guide, a seasoned smuggler, had

disembarked few kilometres short of the city's main marketplace, coaxing his obedient camel down to its haunches, before helping the mother off the animal's back, followed by the suitcase, the displaced family's only belonging. Having securely tied up the camel to the trunk of a tree, an arrangement that, apparently, both the smuggler and his animal were familiar with, the smuggler motioned to the woman and her three daughters to follow him as he led them towards the main

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marketplace at the centre of the city, where they could easily melt away into the hustle and bustle, avoiding the prying eyes of the Sudanese immigration policemen. The smuggler had issued his instructions to them as soon as they crossed the border into the Sudan. "You realise we are now on the Sudanese side of the border, so refrain from talking amongst yourselves, and avoid eye contact with anyone on the streets of Kassala," he had warned. "Otherwise, you will give yourselves away as refugees, and always remember that the policemen are on the lookout for refugees like you." It was about 6am and the sun, overhead, was already warm and growing warmer by the minute. One after the other, they cautiously walked through the narrow streets of Kassala. The smuggler, followed by Miryam carrying the battered suitcase,

the mother, Nadia, and Dahab was last. Sudanese immigration officials disguised in plainclothes had roamed the streets looking out for illegal migrants. The recent influx, mainly Eritrean refugees, had caused the authorities and locals in Kassala a big headache. The understanding back in Keren was that the Sudanese policemen rarely got up before 8am, and so the trick was to make it, stealthily, to the centre of the city in the early morning, while the police were still in bed, and then melt away among the locals. They looked like a group of commandos on a pre-dawn mission, as the smuggler and his new refugees shuffled along the narrow streets of Kassala. It was the routine that the smuggler had followed each time he led a bunch of heartbroken souls into the world of refugees. It was 6:30am when they finally emerged onto a vast open space that turned out to be the main marketplace. The smuggler stopped and turned to face the woman and her daughters.

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“Congratulations. You have made it safely to Kassala.” He declared. “In less than an hour this marketplace will burst into life with people. You will look like any one of them, and no one will be able to tell you apart.” And then addressing the mother, “Some of the shoppers here would be refugees like you, some possibly from Keren, and I am confident you

will meet people you knew in there, and they should be able to help you find your relatives in Kassala.” And he walked off, possibly towards the place where he had left his camel, and from there, most likely, back to Keren, and back to Kassala in a few weeks time, with more refugees. The case of the smugglers and the poor refugees had tended to highlight life’s cruel reality, that someone’s miseries had opened up a window of opportunity to others. People smuggling had become a lucrative business. And it seemed like nothing short of dispatching the entire Eritrean population across the border would satiate the smugglers’ greed for more money. Meanwhile, the woman and her three daughters had found themselves in no man’s land, besieged by fear and uncertainty. The marketplace was still empty. The girls looked at their mother for reassurance, but she was as lost and clueless as her daughters. The poor souls happened to be the only people in the sleepy marketplace and to all intents and purposes they looked like strangers, displaced refugees, the very people that the policemen would be looking for. They were like sitting ducks. Everything about them gave away their true identity. They stood out by being so early in the marketplace, by the type of their clothes and not least by the type of suitcase they had in their possession. Any passing police patrol could spot them so easily. They hoped and prayed that the marketplace would fill up with people, sooner, before the police patrol took notice of them. It was a race against time.

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If they were caught out, they would be taken to a detention centre and then be handed over to the Ethiopian authorities across the border. The thought of that had petrified them. When they left Keren, they hoped to find Ms Hayatt, the mother's sister, and stay with her for a few weeks, before they made their next move. Hayatt and her husband had left Keren, a few years before and settled in Kassala. Hayatt had visited them in Keren five years ago, accompanied by her son, Kamal. But five years was a long time in the lives of the ever-moving refugees, always on the lookout for a greener pastures, and better opportunities elsewhere. To many Eritreans, Kassala was just a place of transit, before they spread wings and moved elsewhere, as far away as America and Australia. So there was no guarantee that Hayatt and her family would still be in Kassala. But they hoped to find their relatives soon after they reached Kassala, as they didn't have a plan B. The brief time at the marketplace had allowed them a moment to take stock of their physical wellbeing. They began to feel that their muscles were aching, and their feet were full of blisters, from the long walk. They were hot and sweaty, and most importantly they were so hungry. Gradually, the shop owners and then the shoppers began to trickle into the marketplace. Padlocks clattered as the metal

doors opened for business. And with each shop door opening, their spirit had lifted and they felt a bit safer. Suddenly they detected the distinctive scent of bread. A bakery, across the road, had just opened its doors to customers. By now most of the shops had opened and the hustle and bustle was in full swing