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Reversing Victimology: Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* as a War Narrative of Female Agency

ABSTRACT Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019) is a fictional retelling of the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936). If war narratives are often told from the perspective of the male gaze, Mengiste's novel reverses such common practice by recounting the tale of the Ethiopian women who fought against the Italian soldiers. Even though at the beginning of the novel the female characters appear as victims of a patriarchal society, the author *de facto* constructs a narrative of female agency that goes beyond victimology: once the war breaks out, the women actively refuse the submissive role imposed on them by society, instead taking up arms to fight the invaders. This chapter analyses how the female characters in the novel transition from a condition of victimhood to a politics of agency, defying the constrictions of both their own patriarchal society and of the foreign gaze of the colonisers.

KEYWORDS African literature, female agency, Maaza Mengiste, war narrative

Introduction

The Shadow King (2019) is the second novel by Ethiopian-American author Maaza Mengiste. Shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, *The Shadow King* has since been widely celebrated by critics and readers alike for its fictional retelling of the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936). The story is set in Ethiopia in 1935; while *The Shadow King* can be defined as a choral novel, the narration mainly focuses on the representation of the female soldiers who fought during the conflict and who are defined by Mengiste as "the forgotten black women" (Mengiste 2019).

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From a historical perspective, the invasion of Ethiopia was part of the colonial expansion policy of Benito Mussolini's fascist dictatorship.[1] In 1935, without an official declaration of war, the Italian armies that were located in Eritrea and Somalia (both of which already were Italian colonies) attacked and invaded Ethiopia. Notwithstanding its brevity, the Italo-Ethiopian War was particularly brutal, as Mussolini not only allowed the use of poison gas but Italian troops also destroyed Red Cross hospitals and civilian targets (Sbacchi 1997, 55).[2] Despite "Italy's policy of ruthless repression [which] was meant to destroy Ethiopian resistance, to compel the Ethiopian Church, local leaders, and the intelligentsia to collaborate with the occupying power" (Sbacchi 1997, 178), the resistance of the Ethiopians spread throughout the country and continued even after the end of the war, complicating the creation of a stable colony.[3] In 1936, Italy announced the annexation of Ethiopia to its colonial territories. The Italian acquisition of Ethiopia led to the creation of so-called Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*, also known as AOI) in the Horn of Africa, a colony that also included Somalia and Eritrea. This meant the desegregation of the

1 The colonial expansion of Italy in Africa actually began after the country's unification in 1870, when Italy started to expand its territories by acquiring a few protectorates in Africa, such as Assab Bay and Massawa, both located on the Red Sea. However, it was during Mussolini's fascist dictatorship that colonialism became "central to the construction of nationhood, […] [and] emerged as a key component of the regime's project of unifying Italians" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005, 2).

2 The use of poison gas in Ethiopia led to protests against Mussolini's government both in Italy and internationally, even within the League of Nations (the first intergovernmental organisation, a predecessor of the current United Nations, whose goal was to maintain world peace). In order to contain the anti-Italian sentiment, Mussolini created counter-propaganda, according to which Italy's military attacks were a response to supposed atrocities committed by Ethiopians against Italian soldiers, such as emasculation and the use of explosive bullets. In this sense, during the war, both Italy and Ethiopia violated international conventions: Italy had signed the 1925 Geneva Protocol that prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons in war; Ethiopia failed to respect the 1929 Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. To read more, see *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935–1941* by Alberto Sbacchi (1997) and *I gas di Mussolini. Il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia* by Angelo Del Boca (1996).

3 For a comprehensive account of the Ethiopian resistance, see "Review of the Literature on Ethiopian Resistance with Particular Emphasis on Gojjam: 1936–1941" (2003) by Seltene Seyoum and Chapter 7 in Sbacchi (1997).

Ethiopian Empire that had been previously governed by Emperor Haile Selassie until the arrival of Italian troops in 1935.[4]

As mentioned above, *The Shadow King* is a fictional retelling of the Italo-Ethiopian War. Besides its relevance as a historical narration, this chapter is interested in Mengiste's representation of female characters within the novel. War narratives are usually gendered, and "war experience is constructed according to culturally distinct gender expectations" which are also inscribed in literary writing even though "society censors those who write outside of what is considered to be their gender-specific experience: women should not write about the front as a lived experience; men should not describe threatened masculinity" (Cooke and Woollacott 1993, xii). Within war narrations, female characters are often relegated to marginal positions such as cooks, nurses, victims, and so on. Such roles reiterate the subordination of women to patriarchal and sometimes colonial hierarchies. *The Shadow King* reverses these kinds of narration through the unveiling of the history of Ethiopian female soldiers. This chapter analyses how Mengiste's war narrative goes beyond victimology by representing female characters who transition from an initial position of submissiveness into active agents, defying colonial and patriarchal systems of power.

Reversing Victimology: Asserting Female Agency through War

The Shadow King can actually be defined as a choral novel, since the narration is entrusted to various central characters whose voices create an ensemble of perspectives throughout the novel. The text comprehends four books and three rubrics that are divided as follows: the "Interlude," which is narrated by Emperor Selassie while he is exiled in Europe alongside

4 Ethiopia was finally liberated from Italian colonialism by the Allies troops during the Second World War, a liberation after which the monarchy of Haile Selassie was restored. Selassie's monarchy lasted until 1974, when an economic crisis led to the outbreak of violent riots and then to the deposition of Selassie. On this occasion, power was seized by the Derg, a military junta that renamed itself the Provisional Military Administrative Council. The Derg ruled Ethiopia as a Marxist–Leninst state until 1987, when it collapsed due to the long-lasting Ethiopian civil war (1974–1991)—fought between Ethiopian–Eritrean anti-government rebels and the Derg—and became the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). The PDRE remained in power with Mengistu Haile Mariam as head of state until 1991, when it was replaced by a transitional government. In 1995, general elections were held and the current Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was constituted. For more, see Marcus (2002).

his family[5] (Selassie's point of view is, therefore, almost an external one, and the narration of this part is entwined with the emperor's feelings of nostalgia for the loss of his nation); the "Chorus," which encompasses episodes that are told by the collective voices of omniscient narrators (the sons and daughters of Ethiopia, those who came before and who will come after the story takes place), who recount the actions and feelings of the novel's characters; and lastly, there is a rubric entitled "Photo," which focuses on the description of a series of photographs taken during the conflict—these are ekphrastic moments that mainly encompass the point of view of Ethiopian war prisoners.

Alongside these three rubrics and their narrators, there are also other narrative voices that belong to central characters who are directly involved with the events of the story: there is Ettore Navarra, a Jewish photographer of the Italian army; Italian Colonel Carlo Fucelli; and lastly, Kidane, an Ethiopian officer in Selassie's army. Additionally, there are female narrators as well. Among them emerge Aster, Kidane's wife, a noblewoman who guides the female soldiers during the war; Hirut, an orphan who initially works as a servant in Kidane's household and who then decides to fight against the Italians on the battlefield; and Fifi, an Ethiopian woman who becomes the lover of Colonel Fucelli in order to gather information about the military strategies of the Italian army, which she reports directly to Kidane.

The decision to include a variety of narrators allows the author to offer different perspectives regarding the events recounted in the novel. For instance, if, on the one hand, viewpoints such as the rubrics "Chorus" and "Photo" represent the extent of the everlasting mark left by the Italo-Ethiopian War on the memory of Ethiopian people throughout generations, on the other hand, the narrative voices of Aster, Hirut, and Fifi are central to the development of a narrative of female agency. In particular, by focusing on female narrators, "the author not only memorialises the role of women in this war, but also points to the ways in which the woman's body

5 During the Italo-Ethiopian War, Emperor Selassie and his family went into exile in Europe and only returned to Ethiopia in 1941. The main goal for the emperor was to present the case of Ethiopia to the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. In the speech Selassie held on 30 June 1936 in front of the reunited nations, he denounced the brutality of the Italian colonial invasion and the use of chemical weapons (which violated, as mentioned, the existing Geneva protocols) while also affirming that the League of Nations had abandoned Ethiopia. Because of his attempts to resolve the war through international diplomacy, Selassie has been considered a relevant figure in the international human rights debate. For more, see Chapter 3 in Nault (2020).

itself is a battlefield, subjected to a continuum of violence that dissolves the boundaries between peacetime and war" (Sarkar 2021).

As a matter of fact, Mengiste extensively describes in the novel how the three aforementioned female characters are constantly at war, trapped in a condition of submission that is dictated by the systems of patriarchy and colonialism. In this sense, Aster, Hirut, and Fifi are all initially subjugated to what postcolonial theory has defined as double colonisation. This notion refers to the situation of double oppression experienced by women who "are subjected to both the colonial domination of empire and the male domination of patriarchy" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2000, 66).[6] At the beginning of the novel, the three female characters are all ensnared in one way or another in such a condition of subjugation, from which they can break free only when they start asserting their own agency through the active participation in the armed resistance.

In this sense, Mengiste portrays an arch of transformation from a status of "objects" into a condition of "subjects," which can be further theorised through bell hooks's following statement: "those who dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated as objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks 1989, 80–1). As mentioned above, the female characters in *The Shadow King* are able to overcome their initial situation of submission within a patriarchal and colonial society by becoming soldiers and asserting their agency.

For instance, because of her social status as a noblewoman, Aster is forced by her family to marry Kidane in an arranged marriage. Aster's efforts to avoid the marriage (even the attempt to run away from her family's home) are useless. The imposed marriage results in her suffering a traumatic experience of sexual abuse during the wedding night. This episode is described by the ensemble of voices of the *Chorus*:

6 One of the first scholars to put forward the notion of double colonisation has been Gayatri C. Spivak in her pivotal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), in which she analyses the existing interrelations between the patriarchal and colonial systems and how they oppress women into a condition of subjugation. Spivak writes: "Both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1988, 287).

> But she is still a girl, still that young bride left alone in her new husband's bedroom with her back pressed against a wall. […] Listen as she curses what has brought her here, as she curses names long forgotten. As she peers into the great cavernous hall where her father prepares another wedding toast, and she curses him too. There she sees her mother and the other women bend into one another, arms gently pressed against stomachs, and she hears their whispers like blasphemous oaths: She will get used to this like we did. She will learn to love him like we have had to learn. She will learn obedience as a way to survive. […] There is no way but through it. There is no escape but what you make on your own. And the bride […] lies on the bed and opens her legs and tells herself she will know what to do and there is nothing to do, and she lets herself disappear until all that remains on that bloodstained bed is a girl remolding herself out of a rage. (Mengiste 2019, 316–7)

This extended citation is relevant because it underlines the communal subjugation of women to a patriarchal system that perpetrates generational violence against female subjects—here, in the form of an imposed marriage and obedience towards the husband/father figure. The same mechanism of submission is reiterated over and over again and is experienced by Hirut and Fifi as well, even if in different ways. Fifi is a mysterious woman whose real name is Ferres and who was once known as Faven. As previously stated, Fifi is actually a spy for Kidane; she becomes the lover of Colonel Fucelli with the intent of gathering information from him regarding the military strategies of the Italian army. Nevertheless, despite the woman's deception, Fifi is still ensnared in an unbalanced relation of power: at the beginning of the novel, Fifi is deprived of her freedom of movement by Fucelli, who forces her to remain with him in the Italian camp where she is constantly objectified not only by the patriarchal system but also by the colonial gaze of Fucelli and the rest of his men. In the end, Fifi will be pivotal for the outcome of the battle between Kidane's soldiers and Fucelli's army: it is Fifi who informs Kidane's men of the exact moment in which they can ambush the Italians, a final conflict that sees the fall of both Kidane and Fucelli and the temporary victory of the Ethiopians.

As for Hirut, after the death of her parents, she starts working as a servant for Kidane and his wife Aster. Her relationship with both Kidane and Aster is a complex one: on the one hand, Kidane initially appears as a sort of mentor and protector for Hirut, only to then become her abuser; on the other hand, Hirut's rapport with Aster is also unbalanced because of social hierarchies. The fact that Hirut and Aster share a condition of submission to patriarchy does not seem to unite the two women against the common source of oppression. On the contrary, Hirut's and Aster's relationship is

complicated by the social hierarchy that governed "the feudal Ethiopia of the 1930s, [which was] deeply divided by class" (Sarkar 2021). The influence of such a division among social classes is further reiterated in the novel by the presence of "the cook," a woman who remains unnamed and who often acts as "the voice of conscience" (Sarkar 2021)—for instance, when the cook helps a young Aster in the failed attempt to run away from her father's house before the marriage with Kidane. The cook even endures the physical punishment for this act of rebellion instead of Aster (Mengiste 2019, 47). The complicated relationships between the female characters in the novel, therefore, underline "Ethiopia's history of feudalism, of different ethnicities and languages, and even of slavery" (Breen 2021, 136).

The effects of such a hierarchical system particularly emerge from the initial confrontations between Hirut and Aster, who are fixed in the socially constructed roles of servant and noblewoman. Throughout the novel, there are several instances that represent the consequences of such constricted roles: first, when Aster finds out that Hirut keeps small objects from their home for herself—"a broken pencil, a rusted pocketknife, a torn umbrella, a horseshoe, a small amber stone" (Mengiste 2019, 25)—she violently punishes Hirut by whipping her; second, when Kidane physically abuses Hirut on different occasions, Aster does nothing to stop him nor does she show signs of compassion for Hirut. As a matter of fact, during a confrontation between the two of them that takes place after the episodes of violence against Hirut, the woman actually threatens to kill Kidane; to such affirmation, Aster answers as follows: "The problem is you think you're the only one. You don't know how common you are. […] If you do anything to hurt my husband, I will kill you myself" (Mengiste 2019, 198).

Aster's words hint at the fact that, just like Hirut, she has also been abused, even underlining the commonality of this experience among women in general; the words further reveal that, despite the violence endured, Aster is nevertheless ready to protect her husband in a display of subjugation to those patriarchal hierarchies that require the woman's obedience and loyalty to the authority of the husband. Aster's reaction is a result of the assimilation of those social roles that are imposed upon female subjects by a patriarchal system. In this sense, such a pre-established hierarchy of power allows a reiteration of patriarchal violence from one woman to another, creating an almost endless circle of abuse and oppression. This condition is further aggravated by the colonial presence of the Italian army, since the women have to further endure the objectifying gaze of the colonisers.

Such a condition of double colonisation experienced by Ethiopian women also informs the historical accounts of the Italo-Ethiopian War:

as Mengiste points out, the few accounts of female warriors that she encountered during the research for the novel referred to "women who were married to men of note: They were noble women who had married into noble families or were married to noblemen who were generals in the Ethiopian army. So these women were recognised by history because they were positioned in society based on who they married" (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 40). In this sense, the feudal patriarchy upon which Ethiopian society was based not only characterised the relationships between women, as seen with Hirut and Aster, but also influenced the actual history that was being passed on from one generation to another. As stated by Mengiste, this is the reason why she strongly focuses on the construction of Hirut's character in *The Shadow King*:

> And I started to wonder about all those women and girls, like my great grandmother, that nobody ever talked about. All those village women, the farmers, the peasants, the women who were illiterate, that did not come from any family of any real status in Ethiopia, who fought and yet they were not recognized by history—even by Ethiopian history—because they were not worthy of remembrance. I think the world is filled with more of those women than any other type. I wanted to recognize that by creating a character, named Hirut, who is an orphan and is really supposed to be nobody. But she insists that she is somebody and that somebody is a soldier. The book unfolds around her. (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 40)

In the novel, then, the war becomes a possibility for those women who were supposed to be invisible in the face of a patriarchal and colonial society to change the narrative that was being told: participation in the resistance gives them the opportunity to debunk the systemic oppressions of feudal patriarchy and colonialism. As a matter of fact, when the conflict intensifies, Aster and Hirut refuse to accept the roles assigned to them by Kidane, that is, to care for the wounded and to cook for the army. On the contrary, Aster immediately decides to take command of an army of female soldiers. These women are not accustomed to fighting in a war; they are only part of Kidane's group because they initially have specific jobs to do as caregivers: "Close at [the men's] heels are the women with stretchers and blankets, wool scarves and food supplies. They are the ones who will carry the wounded, bury the dead, and feed Kidane's army" (Mengiste 2019, 95). Nevertheless, once the conflict begins, these women do not hesitate to abandon such limiting roles in order to take up arms under Aster's orders and fight against the invaders.

The significance of the women's presence within Mengiste's war narrative is further underlined by the fact that Hirut contributes to the creation

of the 'shadow king': Hirut notices that one of Kidane's men, Minim, physically resembles the emperor—who, in the meantime, has fled to the United Kingdom; the news that the monarch has abandoned his own country and people leaves Ethiopians demoralised, crushing their motivation to fight against the invaders. In this regard, it might be interesting to notice how it is no coincidence that Minim's name means "nothing," a choice that reflects on the actual importance of the real emperor during the Italo-Ethiopian War: while the monarch abandons his people, leaving the country to the mercy of the invaders, it is common people like Minim and Hirut who carry the weight of the resistance. This idea is reiterated when, in the epilogue of the novel, Mengiste describes the meeting between Hirut and Ettore, which happens in 1974 during the uprisings against Selassie. On this occasion, Hirut by chance also meets the emperor himself, who is once again fleeing the palace to escape the people's protests against him. Once Hirut is face to face with Selassie, she urgently starts whispering the names of all those people who fought years prior against the Italians—Kidane, Aster, Fifi, and so on: "and as she says their names, she feels them gather around her and urge her on: Tell them, Hirut, we were the Shadow King. We were those who stepped into a country left dark by an invading plague and gave new hope to Ethiopia's people" (Mengiste 2019, 423). This episode underlines the importance of the people's anti-colonial resistance; as Mkumba observes, "[Hirut's] lamentation cements that the Ethiopian heroes are not celebrated and recognised for their contribution to their nation during their lifetime. Thus, their spirits demand to be celebrated as heroes despite being dead" (Mkumba 2023, 54).

This is why the shadow king impersonated by Minim during the war can actually be considered a symbol of those uncelebrated heroes, a reminder of the courage of all the men and women who fought against the Italians. As a matter of fact, the idea of dressing up Minim as the emperor in order to lift the spirits of the population actually works, motivating Ethiopians to keep fighting; such deception is also meant to reinforce the image of the country in the eyes of the Italian army. The creation of a body double for the king seems to be an almost common practice, as Kidane recalls: "My father and grandfather used to tell me stories of shadow kings, [Kidane] says. Empress Zewditu[7] even had her shadow queen when she

7 Empress Zewditu was the only empress regnant of the Ethiopian Empire and ruled the country from 1916 to 1930. During her reign, however, it was actually her cousin Ras Tafari Makonnen (Ras is a royal title that often refers to a prince)—who later became Emperor Haile Selassie—who was appointed as regent.

led her armies. Our leaders couldn't be in two places at once, so they had their doubles" (Mengiste 2019, 232). The idea of creating a shadow king has positive results, since it discredits the news of the emperor's escape, not only restoring people's faith in their leader and their nation—and, therefore, reinforcing the Ethiopian resistance—but also destabilising the Italian soldiers who knew about and counted on Selassie's exile.

Additionally, the presence of a shadow king also leads to the creation of an army of official female guards whose purpose is to defend the emperor. Hirut becomes one of these guards, alongside other women that soon decide to join her, while Aster takes command of the emperor's army of female soldiers, training them to fight. Once Minim is dressed up as the monarch, the resemblance is striking:

> [Minim] is a breathtaking figure in uniform, his black cape dark as the dead of night, his polished shoes so shiny they seem almost wet. He is a replica of the faded picture, Emperor Haile Selassie come to them with overgrown hair, a shaggy beard, and shoulders that slump into a concave chest. He is a battle-worn image come to life, creased and slightly faded, but held up by sturdy bone, guarded by two soldiers named Aster and Hirut who stand on either side of him, an example to all of Ethiopia's women. (Mengiste 2019, 236–7)

The remarkable physical likeness of Minim to Emperor Selassie makes the deception possible. Once the news of the monarch's return spreads through the territory, the population comes out to greet the emperor: "Shepherds and farmers point to flashes of sunlight and wisps of fog as proof of divine assistance. Crowds gather at wells dotting the highlands and whisper amongst themselves, waiting anxiously for the emperor's appearance" (Mengiste 2019, 237). The news of Selassie's return echoes through every corner of the country, lifting up the spirits of Ethiopians.

Furthermore, the presence of Aster and Hirut as guards of the emperor also incites Ethiopian women to join the army of female soldiers. In the novel, this opportunity gives women the possibility of rising above the pre-imposed roles assigned to them by a patriarchal hierarchy. In this sense, the chance to fight alongside the men on the battlefield helps women acquire agency over themselves and their bodies. When the shadow king makes his first appearance in front of some villagers reunited for the occasion, Hirut wears a uniform, a rifle on her back and an ammunition belt: "She is dressed as a Kebur Zebegna, a member of the emperor's elite army" (Mengiste 2019, 238). Hirut's new clothes are the first sign of a profound transformation that begins with her becoming a soldier for the shadow king. Moreover, during this event, Kidane addresses the crowd defining

Hirut and Aster the emperor's "guards, these women who are also warriors, soldiers, daughters of our Empress Taitu[8] who once led forty thousand against these *ferenjoch*[9] the first time they invaded forty years ago. Have you forgotten your blessed leader, daughters of Ethiopia?" (Mengiste 2019, 240; emphasis in the original).

The official recognition of Hirut and Aster as the king's personal guards reinforces the idea that the two women's new social role as soldiers liberates them from the initial submission to a marginal position. This radical change also influences the way Hirut addresses herself in front of the crowd that is celebrating the appearance of the shadow king: she claims her role as "a soldier, a blessed daughter of Ethiopia, proud bodyguard of the King of Kings. [Hirut] takes her rifle and lifts it above her head. [...] Hirut steps back beside [the shadow king], silent and stunned, feeling her chest swell, overcome by the display of loyalty and passion. It was, she will later say, as if they loved me too" (Mengiste 2019, 241). The words chosen by Hirut are significant because this is one of the first instances in which the woman uses her own voice to define herself. As hooks notices, "coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (hooks 1989, 34). The aforementioned episode is representative of the transformation from object into subject that Hirut (and Aster, too) experiences once she becomes a soldier of the shadow king. The reaction of the crowd is a further validation of such radical change.

8 Empress Taytu Betul was the wife of Emperor Menelik II, who ruled Ethiopia from 1889 to 1913. Together with her husband, Taytu Betul founded Addis Ababa, the modern capital of Ethiopia, in 1886. The empress was also a key figure in the anti-colonial history of the country during the late 1880s. The episode Kidane cites in the aforementioned quotation refers to the fact that the empress fought alongside her husband in the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–1896), leading the Ethiopian army against the Italians during the battle of Adwa, when Ethiopians defeated the Italian army, *de facto* stopping Italian colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa. The battle of Adwa is still remembered as a symbol of pan-Africanism because of the Ethiopians' decisive victory, which made Ethiopia the only African country to maintain independence during the so-called Scramble for Africa—the period known as New Imperialism (1881–1914), during which various European countries colonised most of the African continent. For an account of the empress's role during the conflict, see Jonas (2011).

9 This Amharic term means foreigners and is generally used to refer to white people.

Through their renewed identity as official guards of the shadow king, Hirut and Aster become a symbol of female liberation in front of the Ethiopian people, motivating other women to join the army. These newly acquired social roles become a way through which women can challenge the hierarchies of both the patriarchal and the colonial system. In this sense, the female victimology tied to traditional war narratives is reversed: if, at the beginning, the female characters of the novel are subjugated to preimposed social and gendered roles (usually as caretakers of the wounded and/or as cooks for the army), by becoming soldiers, and therefore by fighting alongside men as their equals, women can now overcome those marginal positions initially imposed upon them, *de facto* deconstructing the hierarchies of power that entrap them. In this regard, Hirut, Aster, and the other female soldiers present a different war narrative, one that is oftentimes lost through history, since the majority of historical accounts mainly focus on men; nevertheless, such an alternative war narrative can sometimes be partly reconstructed from archives and photographs.

This is the case of *The Shadow King*, which was written after the author's research in historical and photographical archives.[10] As Mengiste points out, the relevance of such archives is strongly connected to the construction of a national history: "The one thing that working in the archives showed me was that if you can control memory, you can control a nation and its future, because you are defining the way that the country remembers itself and how it plans and describes its future" (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 33). Furthermore, according to the author, the peculiarity of photography is that "[p]hotographs do not capture memories. They just freeze a moment. […] there is that gap between what the photographs captured and the memories they might contain" (Brioni and Polezzi 2023, 34). The presence in the novel of the rubric "Photo" is therefore meant to close that gap, in order to reconstruct through ekphrastic moments the memories and histories behind the photos of the Italo-Ethiopian War.

As mentioned above, one of the characters, Ettore Navarra, is a photographer for the Italian army. The role of photos within the narrative has a double significance: on the one hand, they represent the use of media during Mussolini's fascist propaganda—in this regard, Mengiste notices that "Mussolini was well aware of the power of photography, the power

10 Mengiste also founded Project 3541, an online archive of photographs of the Italo–Ethiopian War. The project includes photos from Mengiste's private collection as well as photos shared by family members of people who lived through the conflict. The project can be retrieved at the following link: https://www.project3541.com.

of visuals. That Fascist period was an explosion of propaganda, of posters, of films. He was well aware of what he was doing, and he knew that sending cameras into the war to take photographs would justify that war" (Mhute 2020). On the other hand, the photos also serve as an instance of the objectifying gaze of the colonisers, who consider Ethiopian/African women "exotic beauties." In this sense, Mengiste points out that "photos of Ethiopian girls and women were used to entice Italian men into joining Mussolini's army. They marched into Ethiopia singing songs of what they would do to Ethiopian women" (Mengiste 2019).

The photos of nameless and powerless (female) subjects are therefore representative of the power relation between colonisers and colonised, further reiterating the double colonisation women are subjected to by forcing them into an objectified position. Photos can tell a story and, in the case of *The Shadow King*, the narrative they create aims to present Italian soldiers as victorious and Ethiopian men and women as subjugated to the Italian colonial power. This is particularly true with regard to the presence of female soldiers within the Ethiopian army, something that disconcerts the Italians. In relation to the effect that the presence of Ethiopian female soldiers had on the invaders, Mattoscio observes that "The sudden exit of the Black female body from the perimeter of domestic servitude and sexual subjugation makes it 'incomprehensible' and disquieting" (Mattoscio 2022, 645), a manifestation of female assertiveness that perturbs the Italians. This is the reason why, when Hirut and Aster are imprisoned by the Italian army, Colonel Fucelli orders Navarra to take photos of them in order to demonstrate the weakness of the Ethiopian female soldiers. During a conversation between the two men, Fucelli argues that:

> Some [men within the Italian army] are afraid the two prisoners are part of an army of women. They say Haile Selassie even has female bodyguards. Ettore shakes his head, imitating Colonel Fucelli's own expression of disbelief. They call them Amazons, sir. They think they've come to seduce and kill us and the *ascari*.[11] […] Fucelli holds his gaze. Most of these men are illiterate, soldato.[12] They're bound to believe in superstition. They're scared of many things. He pauses. It's interesting, you know, Fucelli continues. We fight other men, but we're frightened of women. […] Our men are frightened of these Abyssinian women, he says slowly. They make up stories about them and believe them, he adds. […] We think they're so different from

11 The term *ascaro* was mainly used in the colonies of Italian East Africa and refers to those Ethiopians who were enlisted in the Italian army.

12 *Soldato* means soldier in Italian.

> our women because we don't know anything about them, he continues. This makes us scared." (Mengiste 2019, 334–5; emphasis in the original)

The long quotation underlines the relevance of photos and oral stories in the creation of a specific narrative that can influence people's minds to the point of, in this case, stopping Italian soldiers from fighting because they are afraid. Fucelli, therefore, orders Navarra to take photos of Hirut and Aster as war prisoners, in order to demonstrate to his own soldiers and to Italian people abroad that the stories about Ethiopian female warriors are untrue. Fucelli's decision of taking photos of the two women also results in an act of violence and abuse meant to oppress Ethiopians into submission: Hirut and Aster "will be taken outside and made to stand until the sun goes down. They will be forced to undress or put on a uniform or salute in their abesha chemise[13] for newspapers and cameras, for those newly arrived *ferenj* settlers who have never seen a female soldier up close" (Mengiste 2019, 363; emphasis in the original). Such a psychophysical violation is further aggravated by how those photos are used:

> They are made into postcards and passed out to Fucelli's men. They are sent to newspapers and used by journalists. They are kept as souvenirs and discussed in administrative meetings. The photographs of the women are distributed to shops in Asmara and Addis Ababa, in Rome and Calabria, in officers' clubs in Tripoli and Cairo. Hirut and Aster are called many things: Angry Amazon, Woman Warrior, African Giuliette. They are handled and ripped and framed and pasted into albums […]. (Mengiste 2019, 359)

The imposition of having their photos taken and then being used to satisfy the exoticism of the colonisers deprives Hirut and Aster of their agency, objectifying them under a colonial and patriarchal gaze. As previously stated, Fucelli uses the photos of Ethiopian prisoners as war propaganda, with the intent of making his soldiers look victorious in the eyes of the Italians, as well as with the intention of intimidating Ethiopians into submission. As Mattoscio argues, "[t]his is a kind of violence based on the power of the gaze, on making Black women vulnerable to the abuse of their (naked) image in the mystifying narrative of colonial propaganda" (Mattoscio 2022, 646). Therefore, forcing Hirut and Aster to pose in front of a colonial/patriarchal gaze is an attempt to deconstruct the almost mythical narrative about Ethiopian female soldiers, of whom the Italian army was afraid of. The humiliation of Hirut and Aster, their objectification and submission in the presence of Fucelli's army, is a way to show the men that these are not intimidating warriors but 'normal' women.

13 The abesha is a traditional Ethiopian dress.

Nevertheless, Hirut's reaction to being forced in front of a camera is one of defiance: despite Fucelli's threats, she remains impassive, refusing to bow her head or to acknowledge the presence of the Colonel. Hirut's equanimity creates confusion among the Italians: "They think she is lost. They think she cannot see herself, double-bodied and split, clothed and naked, young and old, […] They think she has found a way to escape while standing still, but Hirut, daughter of Getey and Fasil, born in the year of a blessed harvest, knows that this is also a way to fight" (Mengiste 2019, 366). Hirut's resistance is a further instance of the character's transition from an initial condition of submissiveness within a patriarchal and colonial society into a condition in which she asserts her own identity.

It can also be noted how, in describing Hirut's female emancipation, Mengiste confers a moral side onto the character's growth, which particularly emerges in two instances: firstly, when Hirut manages to escape from the Italian imprisonment and has the chance to kill Ettore as an act of revenge, but ultimately chooses not to do so; secondly, when Hirut and Ettore meet once again in 1974, and Ettore begs the woman to forgive him for the actions he committed during the war. As Breen notices, through this episode the author "flips the classic hierarchy of colonial power" (Breen 2021, 135) by giving Hirut control over Ettore's feelings of shame and remorse.

A further testament of Hirut's growth in the novel also comes from the symbolism connected to the weapon she uses in battle. During her time as a prisoner, there is one word that Hirut constantly repeats: Wujigra,[14] a term that refers to her father's rifle, the only object in the woman's possession that was left to her by her late parents. At the beginning of the novel, Kidane takes the rifle away, since he is gathering all the weapons he can find to fight against the Italians. The weapon, however, has a peculiar relevance within the narrative, since it is a symbol of Hirut's life before her parents' death, when she was a free woman and not a servant. "The rifle has disappeared. It is as if it never existed. As if this life, in this house, is all that she has ever known, as if she has been no one else but this unloved girl" (Mengiste 2019, 24). Even if Hirut will only find her Wujigra once the war breaks out, the weapon remains a symbol of how she has risen above

14 The Ethiopian term Wujigra refers to the Fusil Gras, a type of French service rifle manufactured during the second half of the nineteenth century. As specified within the novel, this is an old rifle that was mainly used during the first Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–1896). This is mentioned at the beginning of the novel, when Kidane is looking for weapons to prepare his army for the upcoming war: "It's a Wujigra, he says. My father used one in the battle at Adua when we faced these Italians the first time. This must be at least forty years old, maybe closer to fifty" (Mengiste 2019, 17).

her initial position of submissiveness to assert agency over herself. In this sense, there are two relevant instances in which Hirut's growth emerges within the narrative: first, when Kidane's army is getting ready to ambush Fucelli's soldiers, the shadow king appears in front of the Ethiopian people alongside Hirut, his female guard:

> [The Ethiopian army] do not fear the growing rumble sliding through the valley from the Italian camp. The noises do not matter. Instead, they look toward Hirut, their new image of Mother Ethiopia, the one who represents all the women who have survived the war to raise their guns and fight or rush onto the battlefield to carry the wounded. The army falls prostrate. (Mengiste 2019, 302)

Here, the image of Hirut becomes a symbol not only of the whole nation but also of all the female soldiers who have fought and keep fighting for Ethiopia—a symbol of female resistance against colonial and patriarchal power. The second instance refers to an episode in which Navarra and one of Fucelli's *ascari* try to talk to Hirut while she is imprisoned, but the woman completely ignores them to the point that they get angry.

> She does not change her breathing or stiffen her body or flail helplessly when that same *ascaro* yanks open the gate and bends into her face and shouts her name until it is a hard and painful blast in her ear. Instead, she looks up at his face, bloated with futile anger, and calmly waits for whatever comes next. Because this is one thing that neither the *ascari* nor Fucelli nor this stupid *soldato* staring at her with a gaping mouth will ever know: that she is Hirut, daughter of Fasil and Getey, feared guard of the Shadow King, and she is no longer afraid of what men can do to women like her. (Mengiste 2019, 338; emphasis in the original)

These two instances demonstrate the progressive transformation of Hirut, who is able to escape the condition of double colonisation she is initially entrapped in. Such a radical change is enabled by Hirut joining the armed resistance, which gives her the possibility of fighting alongside the men as their equal. This helps Hirut break free from the objectifying gaze of both colonialism and patriarchy. In this way, Hirut and the other female characters within the novel are able to defy the stereotyped narrative according to which women should only occupy marginal positions within society. It is through their active participation to the war, in fact, that Hirut, Aster, and Fifi can challenge colonial and patriarchal systems of power.

In this sense, the women's activity as soldiers reverses traditional male-centred war narratives, which usually define female characters as only cooks, caretakers, or victims. Moreover, *The Shadow King* also

highlights what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie defines as "the danger of a single story," i.e. the danger of stereotyped images perpetrated by a dominant narrative/narrator. Adichie underlines the power of stories and how they have been often used to construct a narrative of socio-political and cultural colonisation: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie 2009). In the case of Mengiste's novel, the stories of Hirut, Aster, and Fifi offer a representation of female resistance against colonial and patriarchal hierarchies that *de facto* rewrites not only the history of a country but also that of the "forgotten black women" (Mengiste 2019).

Conclusion

In the *Shadow King*, the female characters fully represent the transition conceptualised by hooks: from a condition of subjugated "objects" that is represented at the beginning, when Hirut, Aster, and Fifi are all subjected to the hierarchies of patriarchy and colonialism (even if in different ways), the three women are able to grow into a condition of "subjects," which is made possible by their active participation in the war as soldiers. The transition from subalterns that cannot speak to active agents contributes not only to the construction of the women's own identity but also to the defence of their nation. As a matter of fact, the story of the female soldiers of the shadow king becomes a legend, almost a myth, which is represented by the aforementioned symbolic image of Hirut as Mother Ethiopia. As Mkumba argues, "Mengiste depicts some female characters as heroines that fight against political oppression in Ethiopia to highlight women's contribution to Ethiopian history" (Mkumba 2023, 43). In this sense, the women in the novel defy the oppression of double colonisation while actively contributing to the nation's anti-colonial resistance.

Through the stories of Hirut, Aster, and Fifi, Mengiste creates a war narrative of female agency that reverses victimology. The women in the novel challenge their initial condition of submission through the deconstruction of colonial, patriarchal, and feudal hierarchies that prevent them from speaking up. It is through their active participation in the war as soldiers that these women find their own voices, breaking the transgenerational cycle of gendered violence that relegates them to the role of passive spectators of their own history. Furthermore, as previously stated, the newly found agency of these female characters becomes a key element in the

anti-colonial struggle of Ethiopia. Therefore, in reconstructing the history of the so-called forgotten black women, Mengiste weaves a story of female resilience and resistance, unveiling the voices of Ethiopian women from the oblivion of history and lifting them into an almost mythical dimension.

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