
Resilience and Resistance of Ethiopian Heroines: A Feminist Reading of Meaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King*

Bekelech Truye¹

Olga Yazbec²

Abstract

This article analyzes female protagonists in Meaza Mengiste's novel *The Shadow King* (2019). The researcher gives a textual analysis of female characters based on a theoretical framework of post-structural feminist theories. The article critically explores the female characters' subjectivity, sexuality, and agency. The framework of analysis is drawn from the concepts of subjectivity, agency, and sexuality. The study reveals that female characters in the selected novel are conscious of their selfhood and take pride in their identity. Despite being victims of rape and domestic violence, these women recognize their worth and are resolute in defending their country's sovereignty by aligning with male patriots. They appear to defy the common stereotypes of female characters because they are assertive and assume agency. Biological differences and sexual abuse do not also seem to deter them from demonstrating that they have the power to excel in roles that tradition has ascribed only to men. The findings also reveal that exploring the female characters' agency and sexuality throws new light on readers' perceptions of the characters in the selected novel. They stand out in the novel because they have a voice, are self-conscious, and are capable of decision-making. They have individuality.

Key Terms: [Subjectivity, sexuality, agency, subversion]

¹ Bekelech Truye: A PhD. Student in the department of Foreign Language and Literature, Addis Ababa University

² Olga Yazbec: Assistant Professor of literature in College of Education and Language Studies, Addis Ababa University.

1. Introduction

The Feminist movement is a social movement that strives to raise the status of women, who had a legal status similar to that of children. This happened due to economic dependency either on their fathers or their husbands. They were deprived of inheritance, education, opportunity to vote, to name but a few. This strong segregation and inequality they were confronting initiated them to struggle, which brought about feminism that strives for the freedom of women and equal opportunity of sexes in all places.

What historians refer to as first-wave feminism began in the late 18th century with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and ended with the approval of the Twentieth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protected a woman's right to vote. First-wave feminists advocated that, women should have equal rights with men.

The second wave of feminist movement emerged after Simon de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* was published in 1953. In her book, de Beauvoir raises a fundamental question: "What is a woman?" According to her argument, femininity, which is considered as the essence of a woman, has to do nothing with nature, suggesting values and standards are dictated by the dominant male sex.

The third wave is considered a response to the perceived failures of the so-called remaining two waves of feminism. In a much reviewed and cited article on the relationship between first and third world feminisms, Chandra Mohanty (1991: 10) argues that women in the third world have been considered not agents of their destiny, but victims.

This article uses a theoretical framework derived from post-structural feminist theories. These theories belong to the third wave of feminism. Post-Structural Feminism attributes significance to gender relations in literary study. The female characters interact with men both in the private and social spheres. This is because gender equality promotes women's and men's well-being and social harmony. Post-structural feminists, like other feminists,

maintain that an understanding of gender relations can throw light on how to mitigate the problems of gender equality and women's oppression (Fielding, 2023).

In *The Shadow King*, the themes of heroism and patriotism, the brutality of war, and the solidarity between men and women are presented through the perspective of the novelist, who crafted a fictional narrative based on historical accounts provided by those who witnessed or participated in the Ethio-Italian war. It is worth noting that Maaza employs a motif, the chorus, which advises the young girl, Aster, not to defy traditions regarding marriage norms. In Maaza's selected novel, Hirut and Aster emerge as prominent figures and play leading roles.

2. Statement of the Problem

The study explores how Maaza Mengiste deconstructs "masculinity" in her novel through the lens of Post-Structural Feminism. In *The Shadow King*, Mengiste portrays female characters as proud, self-aware, and assertive. They also engage in acts of agency within the traditional society they inhabit. Researchers have not investigated the agency and sexuality of these female characters in the selected novel. Therefore, this analysis can illuminate the portrayal of female characters and address the existing research gap.

Female characters' subjectivity, agency, and sexuality deserve consideration because they challenge male domination and recognize women's "unique experiences" in the patriarchal culture", where "women have been historically marginalized" ("Female Subjectivity: Literary Theory and Criticism: Class Notes: Fiveable", 2024:1). Self-conscious Women also take control of their sexuality and are capable of agential acts. These issues have not been examined in the selected novel. Therefore, this article can contribute to readers' deeper understanding of the selected novel.

3. Objectives of the Study

General Objective of the Study

The study examines the representation of female characters in *The Shadow King* based on paradigms drawn from Post-Structural Feminism.

Specific Objectives

In light of this general objective, the following are the specific objectives of this study.

1. To examine whether the female characters are subjects who are capable of resisting gender inequality in the patriarchal world by exercising agency.
2. To explore how female characters, take control of their sexuality, or whether they are used by men as objects who fulfill the selfish desires of men.

4. Review of Related Literature

To understand how gender issues are represented in literature, it is essential to examine literary texts from the perspective of related literary theories. As Nagarajan (2006: 32) states, black women writers have now come forward, avoiding all cultural stereotypes in the portrayal of the women characters. Maaza is one of these modern writers who resist stereotypical attitudes towards women.

Chrispin Mkumba, in his MA thesis entitled *Honouring Uncelebrated Heroes* in Maaza Mengiste's '*The Shadow King* and *The Lion's Gaze*', focuses on the issue of heroism. In his study, the researcher brings to light the deeds of heroes who were ignored for being female. The writer discusses both females and males; however, the uncelebrated female heroes, according to Mkumba, are forgotten due to the patriarchal suppression of women. Mkumba applies textual analysis to analyze the contributions of male and female marginalized characters. He also applies Franz Fanon's Marxist theory in his thesis.

Mkumba concludes that despite their contribution, the uncelebrated heroes do not gain recognition for their heroic deeds.

Post-Structural Feminism has attracted scholars in various fields. Jill Fardon and Sonja Shoeman (2010), in their “A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis of an Exemplar South African School History Text” analyze a non-literary text based on paradigms drawn from Post-Structural Feminism. They found out that this critical perspective offers the following advantages. It, for example, offers “multiple perspectives and open interpretation.” Furthermore, “It opens up space for female voices of the past and the present” (Fardon and Shoeman: 1). The female characters in *The Shadow King* represent Ethiopian women of the past. Fardon and Shoeman apply post-structural Feminism to a non-literary text, unlike the present article.

Aston (2016), in her article “Feminist Post-Structuralism: Founding Scholars Still Relevant Today”, discusses a teacher’s experience in teaching Post-Structural Feminism. Aston talks about a teacher who taught Post-Structural Feminism for twenty years. She explains that “Ideas” from scholars such as Foucault, Butler, Scott, and Weedon are brought together into a particular understanding” of Post-Structural Feminism (Aston, 2016: 1). Aston also adds that Post-Structural Feminism is applied in health education and clinical studies. The present article differs in that it analyses the female characters’ subjectivity, sexuality, and agency in the selected novel. Post-structural feminists view literary texts as discourse. Both literary and non-literary texts are forms of discourse. Aston applies Post-Structural Feminism to non-literary discourse. But the present article applies Post-Structural Feminism to literary discourse.

5. Theories

Researchers find Post-Structural Feminism useful in the study of discourses. Simmons (2020: 1) states that post-structuralism and feminism are used in the context where “multiple experiences could be considered, particularly about feelings of oppression, empowerment and being ‘good enough’ within modern motherhood.” In this context, empowerment refers to feminist

empowerment. Simmons states that post-structural feminism is adopted as “an appropriate worldview for her research.

Although different forms of post-structuralism vary in both their practice and in their political implications, they share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning, and subjectivity. Post-structuralists see no essential connection between the word and its meaning. Regarding literary works, they say that there is no central meaning of the text that is set by the author. In discourse analysis, focus is on the meaning of the text, not the author. Furthermore, the meaning of the text is articulated in language. Events, experiences, or discourses exist when they are articulated in language (Weedon, 1997:20). In discourse analysis, language is viewed as discourse.

Feminism brings to post-structuralism the ability to address the question of how social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class, and race might be transformed (Weedon, 1997:20). Feminism struggles to bring about fairness in all aspects of men’s world. We can perceive the world through an alternative gendered focus that facilitates the ability to see depictions of international politics different from those conventionally offered. In this case, what feminist perspectives do is that they insert gender as a framework for analysis that deconstructs the masculinity that dominates the intrinsic assumptions of our intelligible reality, offering an understanding based on the experiences of all, instead of a few (Wooldridge, 2015).

Subjectivity refers to a person’s self-awareness of who they are. A woman who has the position of subject is capable of agential acts. She can make decisions and choices independently means she exercises agency. Subjectivity and agency are interrelated. The woman is viewed as a subject, not an object who is controlled and dominated by a man. The woman who has a subject position is a “conscious, knowing, rational and autonomous individual” (Pierre, 2000:9).

Furthermore, a woman who has the subject position also takes control of her sexuality. She is not an object of the male’s gaze. To examine the female characters’ subjectivity, passages involving female characters’ speeches that

reveal the characters' feelings, attitudes, and reactions to the situations in the novel are analysed. That is, the female characters' agency is examined based on the characters' roles and actions in the various situations. Their sexuality is also equally critically examined based on their intimate relations with the opposite sex in Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King*.

In her theory, Kristeva discusses the woman's body where she attributes importance to the "maternal" and the "Oedipus" in the formation of subjectivity. She also opposes women's "discrimination and oppression", which she considers as abuse. She bases her argument on Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic approaches. In her argument, she says that someone's identity starts to build up at its infant stage when the child starts categorizing and understanding the patriarchal world, including the authority of the father and patriarchy, which makes the child suppress lots of desires and ideas. Similarly, she points out that someone's identity develops at Lacan's mirror stage, a state where a child recognizes himself as "I", which helps him to differentiate himself from others (Kristeva, 1980:6).

Women are supposed to be what society expects them to be. Womanhood is an ever-changing conceptualization, but the concept of womanhood is defined by society and cultural, biological factors. According to Marcelin (2012: 1), there is a constantly evolving effort to reconcile the dissimilarities of identity reflected through standards of beauty, sexuality, and gender roles.

Tyson (2006:108) explains that our gender plays a key role in forming our identity. This applies to both our self-perception and the way we relate to others. Our gender strongly influences how we are treated by others and by society as a whole. The selfhood of a woman can be determined by various factors. First of all, a woman has her perception of herself. Knowing oneself starts at home. A mother or grandmother is the one who imprints a woman's identity from the very beginning, during childhood. Beauty, sexuality, and gender roles are the pillars through which identity is reflected. Post-structural feminism attributes significance to issues related to self and identity (Weedon, 1997:20).

Next follows a *First Wave F* of female sexuality. Female sexuality in this context has to do with female sexual behavior. According to Freud, gender difference is a social construction that a child tries to enact in their sexual stages and behavior towards their parents and others. Sexuality is, at most, influenced by the circumstances one is brought up (Kristeva, 1980). Kristeva calls the pre-oedipal and pre-linguistic stage in such a way that the time when the child has no idea of sexuality, as “semiotic” and the latter stage when the child is influenced by society and language as symbolic. In this sense, it is the language that creates the awareness of the sexual difference in a child. The semiotic stage for Kristeva and the “unconscious” for Freud can never be eliminated; rather, it is only repressed (Kristeva, 1980).

In many cultures, maleness is regarded as superior to femaleness. As a result, males are respected and treated with dignity, whereas females are considered as the second class and they are perceived with contempt. To ensure and keep the sustainability of men’s superior status and women’s inferior status in society, several myths have been created and blindly accepted and upheld. Before the twenty-first century, sexuality was often shrouded in customary beliefs and practices that sought to make women ashamed of their sexuality.

Thus, female sexuality is something associated with taboo, so much so that if a woman shows interest in sexuality, she would be symbolically posing confrontation to manhood. That is to say, it would be like altering her image, which is condemned by both sexes, i.e., men and fellow women. Due to this condemnation and isolation, that woman starts to lose her confidence. This influence directly pushes her from positive to negative, that is, from being a self-conscious, sexually active and vivacious person to a docile, passive and easily-manipulated one. Post-structural Feminism is concerned with female sexual freedom. In this respect, Bell Hooks (1981: 86) states that female sexual freedom requires knowledge of one’s body as well as understanding the meaning of sexual integrity. Sexual freedom also means that women are in control of their sexuality.

An issue which nowadays is significant in post-structuralist feminism nowadays is motherhood. Kristeva discusses motherhood in her theory. Kelly Oliver in the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* (2008-2010) explores Kristeva's views on maternity. Motherhood is relevant to this article since the female protagonist in the selected novel is also a mother. For Kristeva, pregnancy and childbirth are the "miracle of love". This miracle, according to Oliver, "begins by the passion of the pregnant woman for herself."

In this respect, Kristeva says that "without motherhood, women remain extraneous, and, therefore, most likely, paranoid or even hysterical." However, what happens is that passion is replaced with dispassion" through the presence of the father and 'the acquisition of language" (Kristeva, cited in Oliver, 2011:5). Kristeva also says that motherhood demands sacrifice. There are challenges that mothers face in raising their children. At this juncture, Kristeva, cited in Oliver (2011:5), states that "the ideal mother must turn away from her children to tend her flowers so that she too can bloom."

6. Methodology of the Study

This research is both descriptive and analytical. The study uses qualitative data selected through the purposive sampling method. Furthermore, close reading is used to identify the relevant passages for analysis. Therefore, deep, intensive reading of *The Shadow King* is done before analyzing the novel. Close reading is essential because literature carries more than one meaning and lends itself to several interpretations. The review of related literature and the theoretical framework for analysis are evolved from books, journal articles, and dissertations.

The researcher selected Maaza's novel because it is a contemporary, modern piece of writing published in 2019. It was also produced by an Ethiopian diaspora female novelist. Moreover, this novel has not been analysed through paradigms evolved from post-structural feminism. The article critically explores female subjectivity, sexuality, and agency. It focuses on a thematic study and characterization of the selected novel. Therefore, reference to

thematic issues, characterization, and other aspects of the novel may be made wherever such details are required to clarify ideas.

7. Discussion and Results

7.1 Synopsis of the *Shadow King*

The second book of Maaza Mengiste, *The Shadow King*, was published in 2019. The story revolves around the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The novel focuses on Ethiopian female warriors. It magnifies what it looks like to be a woman at war. The story begins in 1974 almost forty years after the war ended.

Hirut, a former soldier, waits on the Addis Ababa train platform with a box of Jew photographer Ettore Navarra's letters and photographs spanning from 1935—1941. Recalling the letter Ettore sent, Herut is eager to see Ettore Navarra, the Jewish-Italian army photographer who was forced to document the horrific atrocities at the battle. Holding the box, she starts reminiscing everything that happened during the war. At this very juncture, a crowd of students, including soldiers, protest the Emperor's rule. To calm her nerves, Hirut begins to concentrate on her history. She hears voices of the dead calling her. Opening the box, she starts to look at the horrifying images in the photographs. She then muses over the memories. So the novel shifts back to 1935—1941 Ethio-Italian conflict.

Hirut, the young orphaned woman, works as a maid in Kidane and Aster's house. She hopes that Kidane will protect her from everything due to the affection he had for her mother; however, Aster grows jealous of Kidane's interest in Hirut and begins abusing her as much as she can. Aster discovers Hirut's rifle, a gift from her father, and Kidane confiscates the gun. As a result, Hirut wants to take revenge and steals Aster's precious necklace, a wedding gift. When Aster finds out about Hirut's theft, she whips her brutally, which leaves a scar on Hirut's body.

Kidane “a Dejazmach”, a military officer in the Emperor’s army, starts to organize and train his men before the Italians’ invasion. When Kidane realizes that the Italian army has reached Port Massawa, he immediately gathers his men and is ready for battle. Though Kidane is reluctant about women’s involvement in the war, Aster mobilizes many women, determined to join the battle.

In all these circumstances, Emperor Haile Selassie, whose young daughter Princess Zenebwork died, was unable to defend his country so he prefers to go into exile. Hirut notices that a peasant soldier, Minim, looks like Haile Selassie. Therefore, Hirut and Kidane begin crafting Minim into their shadow king to act as an emperor who will mobilize and encourage the troops. Then, Hirut appoints herself as the protector of the shadow king.

Kidane repeatedly rapes Hirut during the war. Together, they train and craft themselves into fierce soldiers. Hirut decides to kill Kidane as soon as she gets the opportunity to take revenge against him for his deeds against her and her family. During their first encounter, Kidane and his men succeed in ambushing the Italians. As a consequence, the Italians quickly massacred the Ethiopians using gas and tanks. The Colonel of the Italian army, Carlo Fucelli, also built a prison for Ethiopian captives. In one of the battles, Fucelli and his men arrest Hirut and Aster. The women refuse to tell where Kidane and his men are. As a result, Fucelli orders his soldiers to strip, taunt and rape them and distribute their pictures.

Shortly thereafter, Kidane and his men ambush Fucelli and his troops and succeed in killing him. Kidane is also killed in the battle. Forty years after the war, Ettore is still in Addis Ababa, upon his father’s advice that he should stay in Africa to protect himself from Mussolini. Through one of Kidane’s former soldiers, Ettore gets word to Hirut, asking her to meet him with his box of photographs. When Ettore arrives at the station, he begs for Hirut’s forgiveness. Hirut ignores his pleas and orders him to leave her country and never to return.

7.2 Female Subjectivity in *The Shadow King* (2019)

One of the major characters, Hirut, struggles for her identity up to the end. Her father gave her a gun before he died. Wujigra, a rifle in this sense, is a symbol of power. Patriarchal society excludes women from knowledge and power. According to Kristeva (1986: 141), the economy of the patriarchal system requires that women be excluded from knowledge and power. When Kidane snatches Hirut's rifle, he deprives her of power. This is a great abuse for Hirut. This is paradoxical because it was her father who gave her a gun as an inheritance. He also taught her how to use it, just as he taught her brothers.

Her father was not partial to Hirut, though he lived in a patriarchal society. Here, the rifle that Hirut inherited carries dual meanings, material and spiritual at the same time. It is not only the weapon she should fight with, but it is also the spiritual aspect, heroism, that should be imprinted in Hirut's mind. Unlike the patriarchal ideology, Hirut's father made his daughter inherit patriotism from him. As Weedon (1970) puts it is to reflect how social power and social relations of gender might be transformed. That is to say, by offering the rifle, who gave her power; through his advice, he initiated her to exercise; it was he who gave her the rifle. When he armed her, he also advised her, saying: "Never leave your enemy alive" (*The Shadow King*, 2019: 10).

Hirut considers Kidane her enemy since he has made her powerless. Hirut searches for her rifle everywhere in the house, in Kidane's office, and even in the compound, but there has never been a sign of it. She regrets losing it because she is defenseless. Here is an evidence from the text: "She feels herself disappearing, senses her bones softening and sliding in her skin. She wakes feverish convinced that invisible hands dragging her away and she, defenseless without a weapon, is even weak to face the enemy, I'm sorry, Abbaba," (*The Shadow King*, 2019: 20). So, she wants to retaliate against him by killing him for the abuse he has committed upon her and her family. Kidane has disarmed Hirut and attempted to put her under his control. Be it in peace or at war, it is shown in this novel that women are always at war against men who want to subjugate and control them. Maaza portrays men from two different perspectives. We can see balance here. Hirut's father is a

role model for the new generation because he upholds gender equality. On the contrary, Kidane and other men have androcentric intent. These men desire to suppress women's rights.

Hirut learnt from her father how to use a gun. Teaching her how to shoot and how to make use of the 'wujigra' is the superficial act that one can perceive; however, it has a deep intrinsic message. By doing so, her father was dragging Hirut out of the patriarchal society's imposition. He was teaching her how to defend herself and confront her enemy. As a result, we observe Hirut implementing what she learnt by standing up for her rights. So, she insists that Wujigra be given back to her; however, Kidane refuses to do so. She reclaims her inheritance. She thought that this gift from her father was her identity. When she decides to kill Kidane, it is because he has dispossessed her of her inheritance. Here is an instance from the novel:

"I want only my rifle" (The Shadow King, 2019: 65).

Hirut's Wujigra is not only a gift from her father but it is a gift from her late father because Kidane said that it is forty or fifty years old. It is not an ordinary gun; it symbolizes heritage. Therefore, it is Hirut's most prized possession, the only object she has that shows a bond to her deceased parents. That is why Hirut repeatedly demands that her rifle be given back to her. Even at the war front, she tries to steal it from Kidane.

From the very beginning, although the cook has informed Hirut that if Aster has seen the rifle, she will take it, Hirut thought that Aster would not come to the servants' room. She has hidden it under her mattress, wrapping it with sheets. This shows that Hirut is clever at keeping invaluable possessions. She takes it as the responsibility that the generation should fulfill. Firstly, she refused to hand over her rifle to Kidane. But Kidane, promising to give her back some other time, has taken it, soothing her though he has never kept his promise. Secondly, she repeatedly pleads with Kidane to give her rifle back, without any fear. Thirdly, she attempts to steal it, although she is unsuccessful; however, her struggle to regain power is clear.

Hirut is a character from the lower social status, unlike her mistress, Aster. She struggles to lead her life as a maid in Kidane's household since she is an orphaned girl; however, she outshines Aster; she is a brave soldier and protector-of The Shadow King later on. Here, as Kristeva (1986: 143) puts it, writers have started to create dynamic female characters who strive towards constructing a new self. Likewise, we perceive Hirut constructing a new self. She was proud of herself and her parents, of what she was and what she was. Here is evidence from the text. She says: "I am Hirut," she reminds herself, "daughter of Getey and Fasil, born on a blessed day of harvest, beloved wife and loving mother, a soldier" (Maaza Mengiste: 5). The pronoun "I" is significant. It indicates that Hirut has the position of subject. She is conscious of her identity. In this sentence, Hirut clearly states who she is. Starting from the family thread up to the last part of her life, including herself.

Hirut never surrenders to the patriarchal society's oppressive norms. This is because her father inculcated in her mind the thought that she is equal to her brothers. Her father advised her not to fear anyone. That is why Hirut becomes a multi-dimensional character and is assertive. As a result, Hirut struggles with Kidane up to the last minute because he confiscated her inherited gun and made her powerless. So she has decided to retaliate him. Even in Fucelli's camp, she has shown her strength. As a woman, she is good at serving at Kidane's house as a maid. As a soldier, she fought the Italian troops. She has been a protector of "the shadow king, Minim," whom she has made Haile Selassie's substitute to encourage Ethiopian soldiers at the war front. This reveals her creativity and intelligence. The real King fled abroad, so she, being with Dejazmach Kidane, has decided to employ a camouflage that the king is with the Ethiopian soldiers to make them determined and brave in the war. In this case, Hirut applies what feminists describe as bringing fairness in all aspects of men's world. Carrying weapons and fighting are regarded as the job description of men in a patriarchal society. Hirut could achieve all this in her life because of her father's advice and deeds. As already indicated, before his death, he advised her to be serious and to confront her enemies. He said to her:

My child, you hold it like I taught you and you aim it at the heart like I have shown you and you must fear nothing except leaving your enemy alive, (The Shadow King, 2019:10)

In this regard, Maaza attempts to show that Hirut's father is a model who resists patriarchal system in spite of being a male who is favored in the system. He taught his daughter to be courageous, assertive and stand in front of her enemies with confidence. Post-structural feminists raise a question about women's position. Their concern is to address the issue of how social power is exercised and where the women are (Weedon, 1997:20).

Hirut's father empowered her to take agential acts by confronting anything that stands against her. He told her to resist oppressive structures by arming her with the means to defend herself and assert her autonomy. Her father said, "Fear nothing". There is nothing like fear, which paralyses human faculties and prevents people from achieving their goal. From her father, Hirut also inherited priceless moral values like courage, heroism and determination. She also believes in gender equality. She becomes a brave soldier although in the past the military career was embraced by men. Nowadays, of course, women have proven that they can do anything. There are many military officials in Ethiopian military forces. Let alone military forces, even the president of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is a lady, "President Sahile-Work Zewdie". Additionally, according to the information from The House of Peoples Representatives, among 472 seats, 41.31 per cent or 195 are occupied by women. On the contrary, in 1995 elections, among 547 seats, only 11 seats were occupied by women, which is 0.01 per cent. This, in fact, tells us the degree of progress that is taking place.

It is also worth noting Aster's subjectivity. She is the wife of Dejazmach Kidane, one of the known military officials. She is a strong character, who, like Hirut, is conscious of her selfhood. She is also clever and intelligent as revealed through the acts she has performed at the war front. However, grief caused by the loss of her son has made her too emotional. She is unable to overcome her sorrow. Her husband Kidane, on the other hand, is able to

suppress his grief. The following passage shows that loss of her son compelled her to burn her jewelry.

...in the early days of mourning for their only son, Aster threw away many things. She made a heap of her dresses and capes and even jewelry and set them on fire in the compound, pounding her chest as flames began to chew in to the items, (Maaza Mengiste 2019:16.)

Aster should have overcome her grief, as Kristeva says. A mother may face grief, but she is expected to come back to life again. Aster has destroyed her jewelry as if she had no life thereafter.

In the context of mourning, burning possessions metaphorically represents deep grief, an incurable despair. According to Kristeva, “The maternal body functions as a threshold maintaining and threatening socio-symbolic structure,” (Kristeva, 1986: 200). Aster’s despair can be perceived from two various angles. She experiences despair due to her son’s death. At home, she is afraid of being substituted by Hirut. From her son’s loss and fear of being substituted by Hirut. The fact that pregnancy never visited her since her son’s death aggravates her fear of being replaced by Hirut. She reflects her fear saying to Hirut: “I’ve seen you looking around in my bedroom,” Aster continues “you go in to his office and go through his papers. You can’t even read. You think you can replace me?” (The Shadow King, 2019: 32). The fact that she has not been able to have another son aggravates her fear. Motherhood is a blessing; It is rewarding when a woman experiences the fruit of the womb. But it can also be a cause of despair in the case of loss.

Grief, however, does not overshadow the agential acts of Aster, who is capable of performing at the war front. Despite the fact that Aster’s heart has been broken by her son’s death, she has contributed a lot in Ethio-Italian war. Before the war began, she roamed around villages to collect weapons. She would go out early in the morning wearing trousers and Kidane’s father’s cape riding on a horse. She wandered around mountains to agitate people to

get ready for war and gather weapons. When Kidane got angry and spoke to her she told him that she got two new guns for him.

Not only that, she has begged Kidane to allow her to go to war with him and convinced him. A woman who holds the position of subject can be heard. She has gathered women and followed him. She is an active participant in the war including supplying Kidane's men with food and water.

In *The Shadow King*, both Aster and Hirut are intelligent women, who are endowed with courage, determination to safeguard their country. Their intelligence is also manifested through their creativity. Their subjectivity is also foregrounded through their endeavor and decision to put their country's interest ahead of their own.

7.3 Female Characters' Agency

Aster's family was well-to-do and her father gave her hand to Dejazmach Kidane, a well-known military official in Haile Selassie's government. When she has got married, she has been given the cook as a maid to serve and be with her. Aster belongs to a higher social status. Hirut is an orphaned girl whom Kidane has taken her as a maid. Both Hirut and the cook are workers in Kidane's house. Hence, the three female characters Aster, Hirut and the cook in this novel belong to different social classes. Aster is the mistress for both Hirut and the cook. But these women have something in common. They all face challenges. Besides, they are victims of patriarchal norms which uphold the inequality and oppression of women.

As already discussed, flashback is used to show that Aster was forced to marry Kidane at a young age against her will. This shows that women's voices were silenced in the Ethiopian society. Aster resisted early marriage and tried to escape. But this was to no avail. Though Aster was unsuccessful in her attempt, she did convey an important message through this. It was a way of telling the Ethiopian society of that time that it is wrong to force very young female children into marriage against their will. Here is a passage from the text: "Was it for nothing" chorus, "we see the young Aster. We see the

way she creeps up the stairs with a chorus of women ululating at her back,” (Maaza, 2019: 36).

Aster boldly tells Kidane that she has a right upon his properties. This saying of Aster takes Kidane to surprise because he does not hear women complaining about men’s properties. In the patriarchal society, men are owners and possessors of properties. That is what Kidane knows about property inheritance. But Aster rejects such stand and tries to convince Kidane by pointing out the reality.

“I am keeping it. I have earned the right,” Aster says.
Kidane’s laughter is knocking:

“The right? Who gives you the right to take what is mine?
But Aster insists:

”....” I have a right, Kidane.” Aster stares at him:

“Who do you think has been gaining these supplies ready for your men? Who is earning the scarves and blankets and water for you?” She stops and swallows: “I have been earning this for a long, long time.” (Maaza Mengiste, 2019: 43).

It can be seen that Aster resists the patriarchal norm of denying equal rights to women. She also mobilizes women to participate in the battle against Italian invaders. She is not fulfilling her patriotic duty only as an individual but she also encourages other women to do so. The sense of sisterhood or group resonates with here. This action reveals that Aster is a decision-maker and that she plays a leadership role in the affairs of her country. These are qualities that reveal women’s agency (Kabeer 1999).

Kidane considers Aster’s deeds as “foolish”. Instead of respecting her for her boldness and determination, he argues that she has done something unacceptable and dangerous. In Kidane’s view, a woman should not do anything without the consent of a man. Here is an example from the text: Kidane shakes his head and says:

“They say you were in the mountains with ‘buna’ that you are trying to mobilize on your own.” He bends to her face so close and says: “You can’t be that foolish, can you?” Aster finally speaks, “I’ve been doing what Empress Menen asked of me and every other woman in this country. Shouldn’t we be doing something too? Or is this only your country? I got two new guns for you.” (Maaza Mengiste, 2019: 44).

We can infer from the above passage that Aster mobilizes women for the battle and collects weapons to arm the warriors. Equipping the warriors with food supplies is also one of Aster’s responsibilities. Using gunpowder and used up casings, Aster and her women have started to produce bullets in addition to their fight carrying weapons. The implication is that men alone cannot drive out the enemy. In other words, women’s cooperation is essential to defeat the enemy. This stand is also supported by African feminists who argue that gender equality can be achieved through mutual cooperation between women and men. On the other hand, Aster resists gender inequality. For example, Aster resists male hegemony when she boldly tells Kidane that the property in their house also belongs to her.

Aster also has another quality which makes her ability visible. That is her being resourceful. She prepared gunpowder and filled the used casings of bullets. She shared her skill with other women by teaching them how to make gunpowder ready and how they should shoot. Aster says,

“We just need the casings. We’ll give them back their killings.” Aster shakes her head and continues, “I’ll teach every woman how to make gunpowder. I’wana teach all of you how to shoot a gun. You have to know how to run toward them unafraid.” (Maaza Mengiste, 2019: 111).

This shows that Aster is more visible than Kidane as a leader. She is also a trainer because she trains women or her followers on how to shoot and how to use weapons. Aster and her women were the backbone of Kidane’s army. What they were doing was more than fighting. They supplied the army with fresh food. Not only that, they also made the men stay strong and be brave. In the Ethiopian culture, men do not retreat while women are around; they

move only forward. Otherwise, they are considered weak and coward; therefore, men do not turn back at the sight of women. There is a saying: ‘A man who is sent by a woman does not fear death’. The women also pick up the ones who fall down; drag away the body of the dead. Aster also advises them to use every part of their body to help the army including their voices.

Likewise, Aster gathers the women around her and says: Kidane’s counting on us to help them stay strong and brave. Let no man retreat, run behind him and turn him around with mockery and song. Pick him up if he falls, drag his body away if he dies. Use your voice, use your arms and legs, turn your body into a weapon the Italians will never forget. It will not be the same as fighting, she repeats to them again and again.

(Maaza Mengiste, 2019:81). It takes an assertive woman like Aster to mobilize the women.

Kidane has expected support from women since they are the ones who will prepare them food and water. Aster instructs the women how they should use all parts of their body as weapons. Their voices, for instance, could be one weapon with which women should appreciate the ones who are brave and mock the ones who are coward. In addition to their active participation in the war, women encourage the soldiers to move forward; pick up the wounded ones and remove the dead bodies. All these activities are done by women. According to post-structural feminists, power relations between men and women should be exercised to achieve the same goal.

After assigning “the shadow king” as a substitute for the fled real king, Hirut has started to protect the Shadow King acting as a guard. Additionally, it is Hirut who keeps the documents that Ettore photographed, the letters and diaries. It is not a simple thing to store the documents; it is a matter of being an active historiographer. We see Hirut passing over the past history to the present intact. Hence it is Hirut who transfers the legacy; even the one who has photographed all those documents, Ettore has not done so; he could not keep his documents. Rather we see him sending a messenger to Hirut to get

the documents. It can be seen that Hirut, a lower class character makes a memorable contribution for the welfare of her country.

7.4 Female Characters' Sexuality

Patriarchal societies often consider women as sex objects. They are treated as if they have no feelings; as a result, women appear to exist only to give men pleasure. But here we see women who make a decision regarding sex. Aster admirably plays leadership role. She does not allow men to come to women's tent. So, men in Kidane's army repeatedly complain that they have lost the opportunity to exercise their manhood as in their fathers' times. The following passage shows this:

Aster has been sleeping with her women in their area, as if it is an unspoken agreement between them. He has started to suspect that she is not allowing those with spouses or lovers in his army to share tents. Aster has told several of Kidane's men to stay out of the section she had claimed for her women, and that has separated 'who had met and begun to stay together in the tradition of' and women who march toward war:... this woman, his wife, has come in and changed the way things have always been done when men go to war, (Maaza Mengiste, 2019: 65).

Aster, in this case, attempts to practice sexual freedom and has shown that women have the right to control their sexual right. Bell Hooks (1981: 86) states that female sexual freedom requires knowledge of one's body as well as understanding the meaning of sexual integrity. Sexual freedom also means that women are in control of their sexuality. According to Rachel Weitz (2012:445), the three themes, through which society evaluates female sexuality are appearance, behavior and practices. In the selected novel, the female characters respect cultural norms that uphold their rights. But they also resist cultural practices that deny their sexual freedom.

Women's body is a metaphorical battlefield. Women who are in the battlefield fight from two different angles. On the one hand, they are fighting as normal soldiers. On the other hand, they become vigilant protectors of their

body. In *The Shadow King*, the women soldiers, who have been in their camps, are keeping themselves from their men counterparts in order not to be raped. They fight double battles. That is, the sexual violence they confront by men soldiers, and there is also the real fight with Italian soldiers. Hence, they have fought both for their country's sovereignty and for their own body at the same time. But men soldiers have been fighting only with the Italian soldiers. It is worth considering the mentioning of women's body here. Women's body is one of the significant concepts in Post-Structural Feminism.

Likewise, when Aster and Hirut are captured by Italian soldiers, Colonel Fucelli has orders his troops to attack and rape these women and take their pictures while being raped. The pictures are distributed. This event irritates Kidane and his men. Fucelli uses the women's body as a battlefield to hurt Ethiopian soldiers psychologically. But finally, Kidane and his men ambush and fight to set the women free and become successful. However, they should not be victims of men who do not observe moral values. Hirut attaches great importance to morality. This is deeply engrained in her mind. As a result, she plans to kill Kidane because he has disgraced and disempowered her by raping and stripping her of inheritance.

Aster is another visible female character in this fictional work. She is the person who strives to bring about change in the patriarchal society. Women are more than mothers, wives, and sisters. This saying is her motto and that of her counterparts whom she has influenced. The women who are at the warfront sing a song together. Even after the song, the women whisper amongst themselves this phrase: "We are more than this! The pronoun in this case refers to what the patriarchal society allows them to be: wives and mothers. The motto of Aster's women is to display that they are not what the patriarchal system ascribes them to be. The patriarchal society claims the hegemony of men. Women are expected to deal with domestic activities as mothers and wives, bring up children and care for the household activities including treating their husbands. Lillington and Ross (1979:15) reinforce this argument, saying that one distinct aspect of patriarchy as its intrinsic ideology is that women should stay in the private sphere of life while men

should engage themselves in public affairs. This patriarchal ideology predetermines their image and predestines the role of women only to be wife and mother devoted to the household chores. In the selected text, Maaza foregrounds the role of women in the Ethio-Italian war. She also represents the woman's body itself as a battlefield, subjected to continual abuse and violence in both peace and war times. For example, Hirut is raped by Kidane multiple times in the military camp. She confronts many battlefields and Kidane is another battlefield. Battlefield is used metaphorically to highlight the oppression Ethiopian women face in the war front.

Both Hirut and Kidane have been fighting in the battlefield. However, Hirut's situation differs in that she has, as noted before, also fought against Kidane to free herself from his power over her. Though raped, Hirut has never stopped objecting Kidane's act. His power was above her capacity. That is why she is determined to retaliate, her absolute last measure.

Kidane also disempowers Hirut by taking her inherited rifle. At the same time, he complains about his father's cape mentioning that his father bled on that for his country: "My father bled on that cape and you are mocking his sacrifice for this country, Kidane speaks to Aster" (The Shadow King, 2019: 44). Here, Kidane's actions reflect male hegemony, suggesting that Aster should not use what does not belong to her. Kidane complains that Aster misuses his father's belongings. But this not true. Aster is his wife. She wears his father's clothes when she goes to agitate people to be ready for war. By doing this, she is actually observing a war protocol.

Both Kidane and Hirut's feelings towards those things they inherited from their fathers are similar; however, Kidane does not respect Hirut's feelings.

Kidane also disregards her property while valuing his own, which shows male hegemony, underscoring how women's belongings are deemed less significant than those of men.

Women's selfhood is usually suppressed in patriarchal societies. . Kidane repeatedly rapes Hirut because he thinks that women are objects to be used

by men. As already indicated, women are also raped at the battlefield. Earlier in the story when Kidane brings the orphan Hirut to his house, he intends to care for her like a father. He exhibits paternal affection towards Hirut. He acts like her protector. For example, when Aster's necklace is missing, he takes the blame upon himself saying that he himself misplaced it a long time ago. Kidane is metaphorically a shield for Hirut. He even calls her "Little One". Here is a passage: "It is not her fault that he loves her, too, that he calls her Little One, Lillie Sister" (The Shadow King, 2019: 20).

Later, however, his attitude changes. He rapes and abuses Hirut while he took Aster, who is forced into marriage at a young age, as his wife. She makes it clear when she says "I bled when I shouldn't," (The Shadow King, 2019:44). In this novel, it is observed that women do not have their own right but they are obliged what the tradition sets upon them. Being on her marital bed, Aster has begged Kidane to let her go home. But the chorus tells her that she cannot escape from the tradition. The role of the chorus, therefore, seems to satirically enforce the traditional norms. This is expressed as follows: "There is no way out but through it. There is no escape but what you make from the inside." (The Shadow King, 2019: 67).

The chorus admits what the tradition accepts; however, Aster has tried to escape from the early marriage her father arranged. Agreeing with the cook, Aster has designed how she could set herself free though she has not succeeded. Here her attempt brings in to light her resolve. Besides, we see her blaming Kidane for the action he has done on their marital day in her early age. Similarly, the Italian Colonel Fuceli encourages his troops saying: "There is no way but through. There is no escape but forward." (*The Shadow King*, 2019, P. 67)

The advice given to a young girl about to be raped is the same as the battle cry in the battlefield. Hence, a similarity is drawn between a woman's body and a battlefield. Both Fucelli and the chorus emphasized this fact. Aster herself analogically expresses her experience on the day she got married in terms of blood that is shed at a battlefield. She compares her experience as a

new bride to that of Kidane's father at the battlefield. For Kidane, this was a joke. So, he has furiously responded saying: "My father bled on that cape and you are mocking his sacrifice for this country" (*The Shadow King*, 2019, p. 44)

Kidane shoots to his feet and points in her face. He is furious and dangerously close to lunging at her. Aster painfully remembers the first day of her wedding. So, she tells Kidane: "I have bled when I shouldn't." (*The Shadow King*, 2019, P.67). Here, Aster implies that Kidane cannot forget the blood that his father shed to save his country from the invaders. But the painful bleeding that Aster had when they first met together as husband and wife is nothing for Kidane. His indifference makes Aster angry. In her view, he acts as if there were blood difference between his father and Aster.

8. Conclusion

The female characters in the selected novel resist male dominance and gender inequality through the agential acts they perform in the various contexts of the novel. Maaza Mengiste creatively reveals that there were women during the Ethio-Italian war, who had self-respect and were proud of who they are. The female characters in the selected novel represent and reclaim narratives of the forgotten heroines that history appear to have overlooked. Their agential acts are revealed through the patriotic deeds they perform at the war front. Despite their participation in the fight alongside their Ethiopian brothers, the heroines lauded for their courage and heroic deeds are also victims of sexual abuse, rape and domestic violence.

Furthermore, the feminine attributes of the female characters are a source of their beauty. These women are also caring. They provide invaluable support to the wounded soldiers in the war front. Besides, they produce bullets from used casings, ensuring the soldiers are well supplied. They themselves fight after taking trainings. Therefore, they have contributed a lot to victory and Ethiopian sovereignty. These characters stand as unforgettable heroines. In *The Shadow King* Maaza Mengiste masterfully blends fact and fiction.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I am indebted to Addis Ababa University for financial and material support it provided to me. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to ZenaLissan Journal Managing Board for its decision to facilitate the evaluation and publication of my article. I would also like to thank Dr. Girma Mengistu and Dr. Zinawork Assefa, who have been supportive.

References

- Aston, M. (2016). *Teaching Feminist Post-Structuralism: Founding Scholars Still Relevant Today*. <https://www.scrip.org>
- Bancroft, L., Long, B. et al. (2003). Distress about sex: A national survey of women in heterosexual relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32(3), 193–208. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1023420431760>.
- Beauvoir, S. (1953). *The Second Sex*. Carolina USA: Duke University Press.
- Hyde, J., & DeLamater, J. (2020). *Understanding human sexuality* (14th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Daniel, K. C. (2009). Dialogues between feminists and Jacques Lacan on female hysteria and femininity [McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts]. <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/455/> Davies, Bronwyn and Susanne Gannon, *Feminism/Post-Structuralism*. <https://www.researchgate.net>
- Davies, B. (1990). *Agency as a discursive practice: A classroom scene observed*”, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(3):341-361.
- Debra, M. and Sally D. (October 2010). *Women’s Sexuality and Meaning Making Article in Journal of Constructivist Psychology. StabbTexas Woman’s University, Denton Texas, USA.* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233197771>.
- Fardon, J. and Shoeman, S. (2010). *A Feminist Post Structuralist Analysis of an Exemplar South African History Text*. [scielo.org](https://www.scielo.org).
- “Female Subjectivity: Literary Theory and Criticism: Class Notes: Fiveable” (2024). library.fiveable.me
- Halpern, H., Domingo, P., and et al. (2015). *Research Reports and Studies. Parents’ Gender Ideology and Gendered Behavior as Predictors of Children’s Gender-Role Attitudes: A Longitudinal Exploration*.
- Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Edited by Leon S. Roudiez and translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez. London: Blackwell.
- Lillington, B. a. (1976). *Women in the World*. California: Clio Press inc.

- Marcelin, L. H. (2020). *Justice and rule of law failure in Haiti: A view from the Shanties*. *Journal of community psychology*, 48(2), 267-282.
- Maaza Mengiste. (2019). *The Shadow King*. Omari and Mblinyi, African Values and Child Rights
- Mkumba, C. (2023). *Honouring Uncelebrated Heroes in Maaza Mengiste's The Shadow King and Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. MA Thesis. University of Malawi: Malawi. ma-lit-07-20@unima.ac.mw
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jh.v31i2.3>
- Mohanty, C. T. (1986). *Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses*.
- Mquirmi El, Nihal (2020). "How post-structural feminism and its focus on the concept of gender provide an innovative challenge to the status within Security Studies". www.polycenter.ma New York:
- Oliver, K. "Julia Kristeva's Maternal Passions". *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* (2008-2010). [o┐_oliver-kriste...passions-pdf](#).
- Simmons, Helen (2020). *Feminist Post-Structuralism as a World View*. <https://link.springer.com>
- Stone, A. (2016). *Not making a movie: The live casting of Shakespeare stage productions by the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company*. *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 34(4), 627-643.
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. (2nd edn.). New York: Routledge.
- Weedon, C. (2004). *Feminist practice and poststructural theory* (2nded.). Malden, MA.