Eastern African women writers' 'national epics': A new force in creative fiction?

Annie Gagiano

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In this article, I bring five recent, substantial novels by Eastern African women writers together for the first time in a study regarding the texts as modern 'national epics', analysing some of their shared characteristics in foregrounding local participation in the making of East African ethno-national histories. I trace the novelists' implicit, open-eyed moral evaluation of their leaders and peoples, neither sentimentalising nor deriding the often terrible struggles of their peoples against both inside and outside powers that seek to keep them in subjugation. The texts eschew traditional heroic portrayal of single, male leaders in national epics and allow us to grasp diverse, communal contributions to the growth of nationhood, while giving larger, often central roles to women. The texts earn the epithet 'epic' by authoritatively demonstrating that their embodied, localised histories *matter*, testifying to the wide human spectrum of the peoples they portray; as novelistic acts they are impressive and moving bids for recognition. As post-colonial endeavours, the texts effectively decentre colonial interventions. While the chosen novels are shown to be relatable, their individual power of portrayal and aesthetic achievements are scrupulously differentiated. **Keywords:** 'national epics', Eastern African women writers, localised histories, authority.

In considering noteworthy developments in East African creative writing, one particularly striking phenomenon is the recent publication of novels by women authors depicting these writers' societies and cultures of origin on a broad spectrum that might be termed ethno-national in scope, with a focus on key moments and periods in the history of these peoples. Even though the chosen texts are quite unlike traditional African epics in obvious ways—they are printed texts rather than oral performances; employ prose rather than poetry or rhythmic incantation and are generally, if not exclusively, published by 'Western' presses; moreover (as 'histories') they are not focused on the single, heroic, male figure presented as a founder of the nation or people—they have epic scope and weight. These novels are neither 'Afro-pessimist' texts nor are they glorifications of the peoples, societies, or historic events they depict. Broadly speaking, while the narrative perspectives employed in the chosen texts are indicative of profound concern for and with the people they portray and implicitly indicate a sense of the significance of their lives and times, all five writers, in complex and carefully balanced evocations, expose some shameful, deplorable, and sometimes horrifying aspects of these social and historical realities. The implied relationship to the culture or people from whom these authors stem indicates their grasp of Frantz Fanon's perception that "national consciousness, *which is not nationalism*, is alone capable of giving us [African countries] an international dimension" (179, emphasis added). Such portrayals of their people's complex and 'morally mixed' history and relation to their context in a wider world, both of which these writers are deeply linked to (as their novels demonstrate), have been termed "affiliative critique" (Gagiano, "Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in Novels by Forna, Atta, and Farah" 45).

In this article I adopt neither a Lukàcsian nor a Bakhtinian perspective regarding genre identifications distinguishing epic from novel, for the five Eastern African novels are seen as accounts having epic scope and weight, but as earthed or 'homed' and communally focused, rather than as manifestations of the existential loneliness that Lukàcs (35) sees as producing the novel in its modern reincarnation of the epic. Yet, unlike Bakhtin's absolute cleavage between the epic (existing in an unchangeable and inaccessible past in his view) and the modern novel (342), the contemporary African novels engage with both distant and more recent local histories without mythically idealising the heroes and 'sheroes' they depict. Nor are the chosen novels, in the mixture of styles they

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exhibit, embodiments of the consistent "grandeur of diction" or "stately rhythm" that an expert like Knappert (28) ascribes to the Swahili epic.

I read the novels as imaginative responses to a yearning that the Southern African writer Bessie Head identified as "a search as an African for a sense of historical continuity, a sense of roots" resulting from the obliteration of "all traces of the true history" (86, 66). Whilst Chinua Achebe rightfully insists on the foremost importance of the teller of "the story of the land" in a brilliant parable, he sees this role as "hand[ed]" by Agwu (god of artists and diviners) to "a man of his choice" (124–5)—a gender partiality authoritatively rectified here by the five women tellers of the complex stories of their own peoples and lands.

In the article I focus on those aspects of the chosen novels that seem comparable regarding the manner in which they depict the nature of their respective 'nations' and portray the evolution of their people's socio-scape; how they see time periods in relation to settings and how they—by means of density, variety, vividness, and affective intensity—construct communal, local imaginaries that powerfully contest and/or replace superficial and homogenising portrayals of 'Africa' as the continent of victims lacking both history and a future in which they are the principal determinants. In order to do so, the presented analysis considers the novels in the order of their publication. The Somali author Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, published in 2013, is hence the first text examined here, followed by Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*, published in 2014. The next is *Kintu*, first published in 2014, by Ugandan author Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, then *The Old Drift* by the Zambian author Namwali Serpell, published in 2019, and lastly *The Shadow King* by Ethiopian author Maaza Mengiste, which was also published in 2019.

The lengthy geographical stretch—from northern Somalia to the southern border region of Zambia—exceeds what is usually signified by the term 'East Africa', especially with the inclusion of a Zambian text. I point to an authoritative precedent, the inclusion of Zambian women's writing in the noteworthy text *Women Writing Africa Volume 3: The Eastern Region* (2007), and to the fact that Zambia is one of twenty countries listed as comprising East Africa by the United Nations. Mainly, however, these five significant publications within a seven-year period indicate a noticeable spurt in women-authored fiction from this area that has significantly enlarged the scope of Eastern African literature and made important differences to the imagining of this region's 'nations'.

The novels are compelling representations of critical junctures in the authors' societies or cultures of origin; delineating in vivid, experientially presented detail events and/or periods frequently ignored, differently perceived by earlier local writers, or seen from contemporary perspectives as misrepresented in earlier outsider (e.g. colonial writers') accounts. Erasures of Eastern and other African histories are correctively supplemented in the five authoritative 'herstories' (here indicative of authorial perspective and/or the central characters' gender) contained in the five novels. In his 1979 study of the African epic, Isidore Okpewho refers to the form's "flexibility" as leaving room for "creative variations" (160).

In Goebel and Schabio's lucid introduction to a 2013 study of postcolonial narrative genres (which opens with the editors' observation of a concentration in postcolonial studies on "questions of subversion, parody, and mimesis"), the writers suggest a need to shift focus to "the evolution of new narrative forms"; inter alia "hybrids like the epic novel". Goebel and Schabio furthermore point to "the re-articulation of the amazingly fecund epic form as a mould for the creation of traditional or emerging national, communal, and also individualized voices", mentioning "a new kind of lyrical epic" and citing a thought-provoking reference to "the 'resistant epic'" (1, 2).

Similarly, Griffiths and Rabinowitz, commenting on classical epics and Russian novels with epic dimensions, state that the epic "can easily flow into and out of" the novelistic corpus. Interestingly, they hold that use of an epic style "involves claims to literary legitimacy and cultural centrality of most interest to literatures on the periphery", which chimes with the five authors' implicit claim to or bid for both local and international recognition of previously side-lined African histories (19, 20). Although the same authors see the (classic) epic as formally most clearly distinct from the novel in encompassing "a final redemptive drift" (47), it is my contention that such a concluding promise, hint, or evocation of a people's possible redemption *is* discernible in the five chosen novels—confirming their epic scope. Aesthetic shaping, complex moral evaluation, and responsible, focused, historical research combine in the making of these works. They are 'big' novels: large in scope, skilful, and confident in presentation—emphatically not *The Nation Writ Small*, as Susan Andrade titled her 2013 study of African women writers (see Boehmer's phrase "small texts", 257).

Since the publication of most postcolonial African novels by 'Western' presses is often taken as conclusive proof of their authors' subjugation to non-African reading tastes and a demand by 'Western' publishers whose

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commercial interests require editorial re-shaping of texts and narrative excisions to make the novels palatable to their supposedly primary reading public, I note that the novels addressed are all more clearly and fully apprehendable by African readers who belong to, or are familiar with, the featured cultures and have more knowledge of the depicted histories than readers who have less or no local knowledge. Nadifa Mohamed, in addressing the dictator Siad Barre's virtual extermination of the populace of the 'rebellious' northern city of Hargeisa by means of military strangulation, arbitrary arrests, as well as torture and ruthless bombing—the historical focal point of her novel—enlightens readers lacking in knowledge of this atrocity, but most Somali readers would instantly recognise references to the (differently named) leader in her narrative as pointing to Mohammed Siad Barre.

The Hargeisa atrocity—sometimes termed "the Isaaq genocide" or "the Hargeisa holocaust", indicating Barre's attempt to exterminate this perceived 'rebel tribe' of northern Somalia during 1987–89—which to its survivors remains a dreadful, indelible memory, is for most non-Africans and many non-Somali Africans obscured by a vague awareness that Barre was a brutal oppressor whose fall occasioned bloody mayhem in Somalia. Hargeisa—the author's birthplace, the city where her mother had spent most of her life and of which she and *her* mother carried deep memories—was formerly a site of peaceful cohabitation. Using familial memories and research, Mohamed is able to convey a sense of life on the city's streets, in middle-class homes, in the military, or in a brothel.

This vividly realised and particularised sense of place and diversity of characters is equally strongly conveyed in the other novels—whether it is one setting that is evoked, or several. Just as Owuor's *Dust* alternates between Nairobi's teeming streets and the wide, sparsely populated reaches of far northern Kenya's semi-desert Turkana region, Makumbi's *Kintu* moves from the dignified, ritualised household of the eponymous 18th-century dynastic originator to the upheaval-prone, mostly urban lives led by Kintu's descendants in recent and contemporary Uganda. Serpell's *The Old Drift* focuses, in a gynocentric 'dynastic' account, in turn on three grandmothers' lives (one Italian, one British, and one Zambian) in Zambia, subsequently evoking a daughter of each woman and finally three grandchildren, who come together in a future but still deeply troubled society. Three places—*Mosi-oa-Tunya* (Victoria Falls), the Kariba Dam, and the city of Lusaka in its slums, clinics, or homes—remain this narrative's focal points, while Mengiste's *The Shadow King* moves out from an aristocratic home whose household servants, represented by an elderly and a younger woman, along with the lord and master and his imperious, deeply troubled wife, together shift into the life of guerrilla soldiers facing the full might of the Italian army during a long and brutal fight (the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–37) to rid Ethiopia of its Italian invaders—of whom two are portrayed in detail.

Chronological engagement with each novel in turn is not meant to indicate a line of literary development or a historical or thematic continuum among the novels, but allows each text the space for respectful individual attention. The fascinating, often troubled histories of the five countries are (by the authors in their representations, as they were in actuality) so deeply intertwined with their respective settings that no reader of these texts is ever likely to blur these five areas into a homogenised Eastern Africa, let alone merge them into a vague 'Africa'—nor does the present article view the novels as constituting some kind of composite East(ern) African historical unity or identity.

The represented characters are locally embedded in their respective cultures and histories and their complex social, cultural, and familial networks are fully evoked with little attention given to neighbouring peoples. The authors unearth and revitalise obscured histories with the compelling "illocutionary force" that Maria Pia Lara (3) teaches us to identify in representations that succeed—by their affective intensity, striking insights, and communicative power—in replacing former inadequate or deficient renditions of their peoples' stories. The five evoked histories scrupulously include strife and struggle with both outside enemies and local oppressors, demonstrating wickedness and weakness as well as hard work, passionate commitments, and heroic moments in the lives of their predominantly African actors, participants, and agents, replacing ascriptions of passivity and victimhood to those too often misrepresented as merely acted upon.

Of primary significance is the unmistakable authority with which each of the five novels morally assesses the histories they invoke in ways resembling the workings of 'truth and reconciliation' commissions. The five works foregrounded here combine the testimony of the daring investigative journalist, the witnesses for prosecution and defence, and implicitly the judge's pronouncement—except that this is not by means of a single 'sentence' pronounced, but in a complex and lengthy narrative which is permeated by a finally assessing vision.

The authors' accounts depict not only, but primarily, indigenes' committed atrocities and heroic or quiet courage, as well as foreigners' perpetrations or their decency—the kind of complex and balanced representation

that persuades readers of the general, if not factual, reliability of these fictional accounts. Furthermore, each narrative is shown arising from and rooted in a *present*—with these roots traced into the past of each of the portrayed nations, exploring the nature of leadership in these societies, and the relationship of 'the people' with their humanly flawed leaders. None of the five portrayed societies is nostalgically seen, with the technologies of modernity and huge shifts to predominantly urban existence and the links to an international world shown to be present. The authors depict how each nation's history compellingly influences its contemporary conditions—for even if poorly remembered, blurred, or erased, these pasts haunt and linger. Undoubtedly the novels are in the end themselves also *partial* histories—in the double sense of being incomplete or insufficient, and of revealing political, ethnic, class, cultural, gender, or generational (and other forms of) bias. Yet they have set in motion processes for the reclamation of local historical consciousness of the nation and its interaction with and place in the wider world.

In a kind of postscript to Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, the author herself testifies that, having lost her "extended family [...] friends, and [...] neighbourhood", she wished "by [her] writing" to revive "these worlds", assess "massive change [...] from the perspective of ordinary people" and also to show how "women have always played a role in warfare" (n. p. and 337). Her first novel traced her father's early life, whereas *Orchard* responds mainly to female familial memories of the city of Hargeisa—recollections including her grandmother's, mother's, and her own. While the text has to date attracted too little scholarly study, it reaped high praise from sophisticated readers who saw past its generally more low-key style (e.g. novelist Aminatta Forna's comments), compared to the four other texts examined here.

Centralised on women's lives, *Orchard*'s characters represent three generations, classes or social roles, and possibly ethnicities—the childless widow Kawsar is probably a member of the persecuted Isaaq group; the young military officer Filsan a likely member of the Darood ruling clan dominant in the more southern parts of Somalia; whereas the orphaned refugee girl Deqo's family origins, possibly Ogadeni, are indeterminate since she was abandoned in the Saba'ad refugee camp on the Ethiopian border. Together and through their interactions with one another and other Somalis, these three characters may represent their divided nation at this fraught time (the late eighties). Mohamed's fictional account possibly contributes to the still widely disputed claim to nationhood of the 1991 self-declared Republic of Somaliland, whose capital is Hargeisa.

The experiences of the three women that dominate and structure the novel are strongly coloured by their gendered positions. I concur with Nick Tembo's suggestion that "Hargeisa is the real orchard of lost souls" in this "desolate state" (5, 16), though perhaps "lost" indicates also what this society once was like, when life could be lived in grace and dignity. A 2001 UNDP (42) report stated that the Barre regime had "one of the worst human rights records in Africa" and in a Human Rights focused Africa Watch Committee report (9) it was estimated that "50,000 to 60,000 people were killed from 1988 to 1989 in northern Somalia" in what was in effect a war of state terrorism. Kawsar ruminates how "after seventy-nine the guns that were turned outward reversed position and became trained on Somalis instead" (Mohamed 14).

The focal characters interact initially when Kawsar—whose only child, an innocent adolescent, was arrested, tortured, and raped by the military and subsequently killed herself—tries to save little Deqo from five women brutally beating her for dancing badly at the Independence Day celebration. Kawsar is a figure of resistance to the cruel regime, but is forced to attend the event; her rescue of a girl-child from the women who have her in their clutches suggests a recuperative attempt to 'correct' her inability to protect her own daughter from imprisonment, torture, rape, and suicide. While Deqo escapes, Kawsar is jailed and later assaulted by Filsan, who viciously takes out her frustrations on the older woman and leaves her crippled and bed-bound in her home. Deqo later finds her there when the mass bombing of the city and near-extermination of its civilian population has started—insisting that Kawsar accept the assistance of a (by then) disillusioned Filsan in order to escape the doomed city and reach the refugee camp where Deqo used to live.

While each of these characters has her own complex history, the resilient, enterprising, self-reliant Deqo is the most admirable of the three; not altogether comprehending what is happening, but a reliable witness—"hers are the eyes that always peer from behind walls or rocks, infuriating everyone with their watchfulness" (60). As Deqo (who is only nine) runs from an 'initiating' rape in the brothel where she has been sheltering and working, she sees a truck bed on which the corpses of three emaciated old peasants are exhibited, with soldiers resembling "hunters posing" with their kills—parallel examples of political and gender power abuse (116–8).

Mohamed complicates a simplistic gender binary of powerful, abusive males 'versus' weak, victimised women. Filsan (for example) later unjustifiably shoots down village elders when one of them attempts to hit her with

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a stick—bravely objecting against the soldiers, that Filsan commands who are blowing up their village wells. Although she later feels the horror of her deed, she obediently appears on TV to present the event as an act of heroic patriotism. Filsan is Mohamed's most complicated character—an embittered young woman who, driven by ambition to prove her military worthiness to the father who brought her up in isolation (with himself) to punish her mother's desertion, soon finds herself thwarted by senior officers' humiliating sexism.

The widowed Kawsar is portrayed in an open-eyed yet compassionate manner—from a pre-Barre life of relative privilege, she is laid low by Filsan's assault to become a lonely invalid, emotionally devastated when her dearest friend decides to flee Hargeisa to live with family in Jeddah. Kawsar resigns herself to death by starvation or in military attack as neighbours are shot and social life collapses.

She yields reluctantly to her unlikely rescue by Filsan and Deqo—the latter presenting the three of them at the text's conclusion as a "family, however makeshift" (336) as they reach the UN refugee camp. Amidst horrors like 'milking' children of all their blood for wounded soldiers, and piles of shot civilians, there are redemptive moments. Mohamed's dense, unblinking, yet moving evocation of a terrible time provides insider's history and is a notable complement to those provided by Nuruddin Farah, Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, and Safi Abdi, adding a 'northern' segment to the complex recent history of Somalia.

While Kenya may (generally speaking) have a more 'respectable' international reputation than Somalia, Owuor's *Dust* lays bare the ugly underbelly of this society and its legacy of secrecy concerning political violence and 'extrajudicial killings'. Indeed, Owuor's vision of her country's murderous history closely accords with Grace Musila's vision of postcolonial Kenya as an "assassin state" (31), and her fierce narrative is an exposé of both British colonial and postcolonial Kenyan oppressive practices. Oppression is a key term here. When people dread murderous state violence against opposition, it keeps the inhabitants in fear of reprisal against the few from speaking out in protest.

Owuor's intricately constructed novel may be seen as holding Kenya's perpetrators and those complicit in their atrocities to account. It may also be read as responding to perceived inadequacies of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission of Kenya. British colonial malpractices are depicted by Owuor in balance with, and as continued in, the atrocities of postcolonial regimes—yet the narrative does not endorse facile or indiscriminate condemnation of implicated individuals, whose difficult, anguishing choices and alignments are depicted with impressive subtlety and awareness of the complex pressures of this fraught historical period (see Gagiano's "Postcolonial Illuminations of Past Betrayals in Tan's *The Gift of Rain* and Owuor's *Dust*").

The novel opens with the "assassin state" in action against an individual as police hunt for their prey: a desperate, doomed Moses Odidi Oganda—like many previous critics of state malpractices, a person of rare integrity and moral courage betrayed and let down to die—who is shot down in a gutter. Several times, Owuor inserts the 'honour roll' of murdered "prophets [...] Pio, Tom, Argwings, Ronald, Kungu, Josiah, Ouko, Mbae"—shorthand references to leaders who spoke uncomfortable truth to postcolonial power—and "the 'disappeared unknown'" whom Owuor thanks in her own voice at the end of the book (23, 369). These widely known, never proven state assassinations are listed with other blatant, unpunished atrocities in one of the powerful "*j'accuse!*" moments of the text (262). Owuor's main instrument for exhuming Kenya's many "entombed silences" (22) is Odidi's conflicted father Nyipir Oganda—a police victim and the novel's most complex, implicated, yet compassionately imagined character, who was involved in both colonial-era and postcolonial atrocities before eventually himself falling victim to state-orchestrated brutality during President Kenyatta's Kikuyu-dominated rule.

As Nyipir and his recently returned child, Odidi's sister Ayani, sorrowfully collect Odidi's corpse to return it for home burial in northern Kenya, 2007 post-election violence erupts—"a country [...] tearing out its own heart" is Owuor's suitably brutal image (22). Through Nyipir, Owuor presents the 1969 shooting of the revered Luo leader Tom Mboya (widely suspected as orchestrated by the postcolonial regime) as "the meaning of clandestine [Kikuyu] oaths that made the rest of the country enemy territory to be owned" and "the purpose of the silences that had started before" (271)—the first sign of the terrible ethnic cleavages in multi-ethnic Kenya re-erupting whenever elections highlight governmental ethnic alignments. Nyipir states that "this death created a fissure in the nation, as if it had split apart its own soul" (272).

When Nyipir fell victim to suspicion of his non-Kikuyu ethnicity and was required to swear the Kikuyu loyalty blood-oath under sever torture, he could not bring himself to do so. He could not overcome a boyhood memory of a brave man of integrity who refused to allow a Mau Mau punitive killing; Nyipir's personal icon of

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moral courage, loss of which is not worth the cost of survival. Nyipir was left maimed, impotent, and embittered against the state, becoming a cross-border weapons dealer and cattle rustler.

Owuor refers to postcolonial Kenya's undeclared, "slithering civil war" (indicating the state's slyness and ruthless cruelty), naming its official languages "English, Kiswahili, and Silence", but adds that "there was also memory" (272–4). Nyipir's memories, intermittently and slowly revealed, permeate the text. He had been an orphaned boy abused by an uncle when his father and brother joined British WW1 soldiers in Burma. After being helped to escape, he worked at a mission school. He increased his meagre earnings as exploited servant by assisting a most disreputable man whose 'job' was to bury corpses of both colonial and Mau Mau victims. This led to his recruitment into the colonial army by a forceful, maverick British officer with whom Nyipir would hunt down Mau Mau fighters. The Englishman was adored by a northern Kenyan 'native' woman whom he took as lover, but eventually attempted to kill as a final rejection.

Nyipir was himself in love with this Turkana woman and saved her life by shooting the murderous attacker, and this interracial killing becomes another of the secret deaths that haunt Nyipir and Akai (later his wife) just as Kenya is haunted by its many unquiet ghosts. The eventual burial of the Englishman's long-hidden skeleton near Nyipir's son's grave creates a moving reconciliatory moment between Nyipir and his former torturer, himself a former police officer deeply disillusioned with the Kenya he had served for so long. The narrative ends in departures, but also with Nyipir's wish for "forgiveness" and desire for "room [...] for trying again" (361). Owuor's complex, profoundly familial and socially rooted account indicts the Kenyan nation, but does hold out hope for "atonement" (357). The complexities of the narrative demonstrate how morally many-sided individual and communal Kenyan lives are or became under the terrible pressures of demanding times.

Kintu opens with the mob murder of a falsely accused 'thief', Kanu Kintu—the only male descendant in the direct line of the founding figure of the clan, whose histories Makumbe has placed at the centre of her people's history. The Kintu who was *Ppookino* (regional governor) in the 18th-century feudal, pre-colonial Ganda kingdom is presented in the opening chapter as an honourable but fallible leader. After the Prologue (set in 2004 like most of the narrative), Book I evokes life at the *Ppookino* Kintu Kidda's court in Buddu before moving into the 21st century, in which most of it is set.

The novel was rapturously received. Readers appreciate Makumbi's writing "not just [...] about Uganda, [...] [but] *to* Uganda" (see Makumbi and Kyomuhendo 40). The novel is as much a multi-generational family saga as a national epic; Uganda (chiefly Baganda) history is filtered through fascinatingly quirky family members' lives—often troubled, with especially difficult or cruel childhood experiences colouring adulthood. Partly because of its focus on individuals' relationships, with political events, power shifts, and civil wars mentioned as if 'by the way', the narrative provides a wry, tolerant view of the contemporary nation, despite the finger pointed at President Museveni (unnamed) in the Prologue to account for Kanu's death by communal stoning: "The word *thief* summed up the common enemy [of poverty and its many plights]. [...] *Thief* was the president who arrived [...] decades ago waving 'democracy' at them, who had recently laughed '[...] I was *sooo* naïve then'" (Makumbi xviii, emphasis in original).

Makumbi's novel ends on an ancestral curse exorcised after 250 years at a clan gathering, but can be read metonymically as tracing how a people, *like* an extended family, suffers a shared national fate and can (though after much loss and pain) heal by coming together. It is not an allegory; the four foregrounded Kintu descendants (Suubi, a young professional; Kanani, a fanatic Christian; Isaac, a middle-aged widowed engineer; and Miisi, a Moscow- and London-educated elder who has returned to the village) give readers access to national upheavals, describing close family members' conduct, experiencing changing social contexts, and observing the complex quotidian textures of Ugandan life—all tinged by their memories.

The life of the *Ppookino* Kintu Kidda, seemingly so solidly secure, privileged, ceremonially conducted, and prosperous, is evoked in its dense complexity and made to seem accessible and imaginable over the 'gap' of two-and-a-half centuries—a tour-de-force on Makumbi's part. Kintu's role turns out to be difficult, exposing him to political precarity and familial animosity and ending in dreadful loss and insanity. The curse is imposed by the Rwandan father of Kintu's adoptive son (renamed Kalema)—not because Kintu accidentally causes the youth's death, but because he fails to acknowledge and atone for the deed to the real father. In the penultimate section of the novel, Miisi (the only surviving direct male descendant, father of Kanu, though unaware of his death at the time) is enlightened about this ancestry (320–1) by two family elders who have come to inform him of the intended clan reunion in which he will have a leading role.

Later Ugandan history is incidentally related, insisting that when the British colonial intervention forced a "patchwork of fifty or so tribes" together under the Ganda *kabaka* as president, this was "against Ganda wishes"—though "the desecration of their kingdom by foreigners [under Obote] paralysed the Ganda for decades" (237). This loss and the succeeding socio-political insecurity are given as the reason Ganda families remain obsessed with educating their children. Some Kintu descendants (like Kanani the 'evangelist') remain believers in British achievements, whereas "the real Britain" (314) disillusions Miisi (a Cambridge alumnus) with its racism and hypocrisy, turning him into both an atheist and an Afrocentrist (see his column allegorising colonialism as 'hybridizing' Africans, Makumbi 305–7). Makumbi appreciatively portrays rural 'semi-modernity' (216–9) and some still strongly traditional settlements (340). Mwesigire may observe that "the rural is not of interest to Afropolitan postnationalism" (112), but Makumbi, by contrast, depicts both urban and country life and social texture. She includes, inter alia, an interesting debate about Amin's rule between the highly educated (Ganda) Miisi and an intelligent Muslim fellow villager (295–6).

While we are shown the general caring warm-heartedness and gregariousness of most Kintu descendants, Makumbi reveals many instances of the curse's effects, or of dreadful behaviour in families such as child abandonment, sexual abuse, child neglect, insanity, sacrificial murder, and even incest, along with the common flaws of stubbornness, selfishness, or foolishness. Five of Miisi's children are killed in the "Bush War" of 1981–86, and five die of AIDS. Miisi is unhinged by the devastating news that his remaining son Musa was killed in a Kampala slum, and makes his surviving child, his daughter (a general in the national army who loves him but can but seldom visit) his heir in a lucid moment. At this point Miisi lives as a 'wild man' and acts as Caretaker of the Kintu shrine near the Tanzanian border. The successful reunion of the family with its joyous and shocking revelations is succeeded by some sorrowful losses, but now such pain is alleviated by communal awareness of interlinked fates and shared concerns—hinting at a way forward for the broader nation.

In a *Wasafiri* interview with Sana Goyal, Namwali Serpell describes her desire to write a work with epic dimensions. *The Old Drift* is indeed a major national epic—conceptualising Zambia's socio-political history (and future) as filtered through three generations in three families and covering almost a century. Irony permeates the text, however. In the first of many mosquito-sung recurring chorus sections, the swarm insists: "neither Oriental nor Occidental, but accidental is this [Zambian] nation" (Serpell 2).

The novel doubles as a sardonic ecological fable portraying a land pushed from its original paradisal beauty and purity to decline through exploitation and manipulation by both outside and inside powers in an unholy alliance, until the country is at last cleansed (though vastly reduced and all-but erased) in an apocalyptic flood. Futuristic technologies are nearly wiped out and life returns to traditional, minimal modes of crop-growing in a small settlement that is Lusaka's remnant where its slum area of Kalingalinga was located. The human inheritor of the three-family heritage is Naila's son—great-grandson of Sibilla, and either Matha or Agnes—since his unknown father might be either of these two foremothers' grandsons. The other survivors—the mosquito swarm—still survey and comment on human foolishness, mockingly ending the narrative by revealing the unknowable, all-powerful uncertainty at the heart of all existence—the true "old drift".

Serpell's view of Zambian society emphasises its fundamentally "syncretic quality" and she tells Goyal that she sees her country as a "contact zone" (Serpell and Goyal 46). While the 'Western' presence and role may seem over-emphasised, Serpell teases readers on the opening page, stating that "this is the story of a nation—not a kingdom or a people—so it begins, of course, with a white man" (1), and later in a local character's private thoughts she mentions "the real story" of the Bemba people's 17th-century arrival from the north at lake Shiwa (98). However, Serpell's two European grandmothers—the Italian Sibilla and the British Agnes, one handicapped by over-abundant hair and the other by blindness—are both portrayed sympathetically and soon after arriving manifest their empathy with the locals. Sibilla joins Tonga elders protesting at being prevented from chosen death (by drowning) as their lands and ancestral graves are being flooded by the European-built Kariba Dam, whereas Agnes, whose housekeeper Grace becomes her main friend and confidante, fully embraces a Zambian identity. Matha, the only local grandmother of the three, is another independent-minded woman of passionate political—indeed revolutionary—convictions, although her grief at her apparent desertion by her lover, the father of her daughter Sylvia, incapacitates her for decades by unstoppable weeping and passivity.

Sylvia is the feistiest of Serpell's three daughter figures. Snatched from Matha as a little girl, she becomes a prostitute, establishes a hair salon, and becomes the lover—and the "Lusaka patient"—of the brilliant AIDS researcher Lee Banda, Agnes's son. He is married to the Zimbabwean beauty Thandiwe, but soon loses interest in

her after fathering his first son, Joseph, who is also intellectually orientated. Lee himself has contracted AIDS and one drunken night infects both Thandi and their second son, conceived in a single bout of sex, finally embittering Thandi, who leaves him (and Zambia). Sibilla deeply disapproves of her daughter Isabella's middle-class and mercenary tendencies. Politically, she 'rescues' Isabella's (and her endearingly portrayed Indian settler shopkeeper husband's) daughter Naila and introduces the girl to the poorer sides of Zambian society. Naila later arouses her lover Joseph's jealousy by betraying her strong attraction to Jacob, Sylvia's son—an autodidact engineer whose work designing microdrones ends up connecting his and Joseph's respective researches, the latter attempting to complete his father Lee's incomplete but risky search for an AIDS vaccine.

Serpell brings the three grandchildren—Lee's son Joseph, Sylvia's son Jacob, and Naila—together, as they eventually (working through many fierce debates and passionate political arguments) form a group of "three musketeers" (519)—possibly a punning reference to the mosquitoes, since they become social gadflies, striving as social revolutionaries against international and local Zambian incarnations of conformity, greed, and domination. Just as Sibilla helped Naila to see a larger Zambia distinct from her mother's narrow vision, a still spirited Agnes calls Joseph a "bootlicker" who failed to learn from her treasured, taped Marxist lectures when he tries to defend the corrupt Zambian government and its alliance partners China, America, Russia, and their combined 'development' projects (517–8).

Jacob belatedly discovers Matha's revolutionary past and she then uses the Bible to teach him to read. Naila, Jacob, and Joseph lead two idealistic, ill-considered and inchoate 'revolutionary' initiatives. The first inadvertently ends in mass, forced inoculation with an insufficiently tested AIDS 'vaccine' that Lee and Sylvia died of, when a mammoth drone pounces to hijack their protest gathering. The second, the musketeers' attempted interruption of Kariba's power supply in order to allow installation of a communication network independent of government, miscarries badly as they inadvertently block the great dam's sluices. Kariba's flooding is exacerbated by a prodigious rainstorm. Is it Nature's vengeance? The river god *Nyami Nyami*'s? The mosquitoes 'view' the engulfing flood as another manifestation of the universal, unpredictable "drift" coinciding with human error, frailty, and arrogance—Serpell's imagined Zambia's fate anticipating mankind's future.

Maaza Mengiste opens *The Shadow King* (a 'prequel', historically, to her first novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, published in 2010) with the central character Hirut—decades after the main events of the narrative. A middle-aged woman, she is shown observing demonstrating (would-be) women revolutionaries in the seventies turbulence that overtook Addis Ababa before Emperor Haile Selassie was toppled. They seem naïve to her, "as if they do not know those who came before them" (4); unaware that women like herself became soldiers in the freedom struggle against the second Italian invasion of 1935–41 (the time span of her story). Mengiste describes her own belated discovery of female participation in this desperate war against a vastly better resourced and larger army by her great-grandmother. *Her* name, Getey, is assigned to Hirut's strong, admired, late mother—honouring this foremother, and the courage of "those Ethiopian women who fought alongside men", for war is never merely a male affair (n. p.), as Mengiste, too, demonstrates. While subtly depicting its characters and their inter-relationships and acknowledging the complex sources of their conduct, *The Shadow King* is more imbued with an epic tone (depicting portentous events and a *national* historic perspective) than its predecessor. Especially important is Mengiste's balancing portrayal of the servant girl and her aristocratic mistress—both in a fraught relationship with the main male character, *Dejazmach* (lord) Kidane, in an uneasy psycho-sexual triangle.

In this novel, Mengiste brings class and personal power imbalances strongly to the fore, along with (or exacerbated by) acute gender tensions. The servitude of the recently arrived Hirut (a young girl initially) and the (unnamed) cook (another, more unobtrusive, but central character, who has been in the household for a long time) is baldly stated: they are "two people who have been made to fit their lives around one woman and her husband" (13). Many Ethiopian peasants saw the invasion as an opportunity to end the aristocrats' hold over their lives: "these people who came to steal us away to work in rich houses" (21), as the cook says. Kidane's father set the pattern his son will continue with Hirut by assuming *droit de seigneur* over the body of female 'inferiors' with Getey, her mother, who finally rebels as Hirut, too, will. War with Italy pending, Hirut's treasured, if old, rifle—her only heirloom from her father—is appropriated by Kidane when Aster, his haughty wife, searches the servants' room for her own lost golden necklace—her wedding gift to Kidane.

The two women, indissolubly linked but bitter class and sex adversaries, remain so during the coming war in which they are also fellow fighters. When Aster finds the buried necklace, she viciously assaults Hirut. The cook explains the hidden source of Aster's fury: Aster and Kidane's only child (a boy) died, resulting in an unassuage-

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able loss to the mother. When Kidane seemed to 'replace' their child with Hirut, eventually also making her his wife's sexual replacement, her hatred intensified. The violation that initiated their marriage on her wedding night is forever resented by Aster the child-bride and Kidane's ruthlessly domineering nature later manifests in the war when he rapes Hirut. Aster defies him by donning his father's war garments to rouse Ethiopia's womenfolk, while a subordinate officer (who lost his heroic son in their joint anti-Italian struggle) bluntly tells Kidane: "you're not the first rich man to try to teach me my place" (254).

Mengiste's novel acknowledges the terrible burdens of leadership, as well as its errors; unusually, she gives us insight into the mind of the vicious Italian officer Fucelli, Kidane's contingent's main enemy, *and* the guilt-ridden conscience of a Jewish photographer under his command who documents Fucelli's atrocities (torturing and murdering captives and throwing bound prisoners down a precipice) which parallel Italy's use of poisonous gas on Ethiopian land, water, and people to achieve subjugation.

Mengiste's depiction of the terrible, complicated intertwinements of war and the baffling moral choices and almost impossibly steely resolve battle participation requires—its messiness, bloody confusions, grief, stoicism, and failures—are rendered with acute vividness. Increasingly, Aster and Hirut become leaders alongside one another despite the emotional tension with Kidane; the enmity and resentment between the two women remaining largely 'underground'. When the war reaches an almost desperate stalemate for the Ethiopians and Italy's cruel successes—aided by *ascari* from surrounding regions and including 'scorched earth' techniques—have all-but demoralised them, Hirut notices that a humble musician, Minim, strongly resembles the absent emperor (living in exile in Britain) and that he can enact the role of the revered leader to re-inspire the Ethiopians. Minim's role is but one meaning of the novel's title. Years after the war, when Hirut is a neighbour and friend to the widowed Aster, Hirut now married to "the great Aklilu", and mother of two "strong" daughters (421), she understands its other meaning—that the war's multiple participants and its several unacknowledged leaders such as Aster, herself, Aklilu and many other male fighters, Minim, the cook, and the brave and brilliant *mata hari* figure Fifi (who becomes Fucelli's lover to pick up and remit Italian war intelligence to the Ethiopians), were and remain Ethiopia's real, composite Shadow King—omitting both Haile Selassie's and Kidane's names from her list of Ethiopia's saviours and placing Kidane's name quite low down.

Hirut finally freed herself from Kidane by using a small knife appropriated from Fucelli's battlefield corpse to end her then grievously wounded abuser and leader's life (398), combining vengeance with mercy. This novelist's understanding of the intermingling of private feelings, personal experiences, political and social tensions, and public events can only have come from probing thought and arduous emotional work. In intermittent sections, Mengiste portrays Haile Selassie as deeply troubled, but an ineffectual (shadowy) leader detached from the nation's brutal, heroic strife.

"History is community", states Jean-Luc Nancy, "which is the spacing of a 'we'" (161–2)—a view borne out by the five major novels assessed above. The "we" in these East African texts profoundly implicates, affects, and includes the five authors in question, relating the writers to their national origins in their exploratory analyses of the kind of nation(hood) with which they are affiliated and from whose histories they themselves emerge. The five novels construct compelling moral-political assessments for their people. 'Nations' are portrayed in their teeming vitality and changing shapes as indissolubly interlinked human communities and settlements comprised of multiple, ineradicably individual participants striving to co-exist meaningfully and fulfillingly.

The five novels live up to Rita Felski's characterisation of works of literary accomplishment as being distinguishable by having "the power to promote a heightened awareness of the density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds" (46). The "awareness" conveyed, pointing to real countries and actual events, is "heightened" by the texts, not remaining a superficial recounting of events in chronological order, but instead functioning as interpretative, implicitly evaluative chronicles which together constitute overdue and enlightening foregrounding of (East) African histories *as* significant to humanity as those (hitherto so much better known) of Europe and other continents.

The above accounts clearly show that the chosen novels are not homogenous. It is nevertheless remarkable that five such noteworthy texts, all written by women writers and sharing salient characteristics, appeared in the timeframe of less than a decade of Eastern African fiction-writing. The novels all include plenty of domestic and familial detail, yet their primary concern is undoubtedly with crucial events or periods in the histories of the countries from which the authors originate, while in doing so each of them may be seen as engaging in some kind of historical restitution or in the contestation of preceding, alternative accounts of the local pasts they depict.

One may speculate that such a surge of writing of distinct quality—in terms of the excellence of careful conceptualisation as well as the characteristics I have mentioned above as constituting the kinds of novels they are—is an indication of the early 21st century social circumstances that have made the reception of African and women's writing—by both readers and publishers—more appreciative. But they are also texts of their time, in that their authors have moved on beyond the initial preoccupation with the colonial incursion which, if featured, is by no means central to any of these novels—hence appropriately and timeously broadening the meaning of the term *post*colonial.

The histories unforgettably depicted in these novels are the East African characters' and authors' own and the stake that such authors have claimed is unlikely to be overturned by reversion to outsiders' accounts of the depicted times or moments as carrying greater authority. My article is partly intended to acclaim the literary, cultural, historical, and political gains made by the five fine texts discussed here.

In conclusion, I recapitulate the main points of this assessment of notable East African novels recently authored by women, beginning with my reasons for characterising them as "national epics". Firstly, the writers have created epics 'with a difference'—they engage with both historical and contemporary nation-forming events, but avoid hagiographic or romanticising perspectives. Secondly, the texts do not focus on single, male hero-figures, but depict the interactive participation of multiple characters as joint contributors to evolving nationhood—all depicting strong, interesting, and fully rendered female characters for their contributions to national struggles, especially the often overlooked wartime roles of women. Thirdly, the texts are strongly grounded in East African localities and vividly evoke urban and rural settings. The portrayed localities and references to locally known events appeal particularly to readers living in or with memories of portrayed events and settings, but are made accessible to international readers, insisting throughout that particular African peoples and histories *matter*. Fourth, the individuation of the large casts of characters in their psychological and cultural diversity puts Africans in the main roles of historical initiators and 'sees' them as central participants in unfolding events, insisting on their agency. Finally, the five novels exude unmistakable literary authority—a kind of commanding charge-taking and acceptance of responsibility and accountability for the histories the writers have rediscovered, both in family memories and through localised research reconstructed in compelling and meaningful *realisations* (in a double sense of achievements and of fictions that imaginatively incarnate the actual).

This is so even though all five novels inevitably embody authorial (cultural, political, and other) biases. Perhaps their five accounts remain incomplete—like all other histories—yet the novels' complex density in rendering their memorable and multiple "stor[ies] of the land" significantly enrich and deepen East African historical awareness, and insistently inscribe their histories among others of our shared world.

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