

# Myth and Counterfactuality in Diasporic African Women's Novels

by

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## **Declaration**

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## **Dedication**

Affectionately dedicated to the memory of my mother, Eunice Akinyi, and to my little one, the iridescent Leilani Akinyi.

## Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the way in which a selection of novels by diasporic African women writers has, in different ways, engaged with myth in order to challenge dominant masculinist and essentialist narratives about women's roles in African society. These authors either draw on traditional myths, challenge the mythologising function of nationalist histories or generate new forms of myths for the future. Although these novels are not counterfactual in the conventional sense—they do not change the outcomes of history—I argue that counterfactual theory offers a valuable way of analysing them. Each of the authors takes facts, historical figures, known histories, and myths, and reworks them in different ways, creating new versions of events where women play key roles. I demonstrate that analysing these texts as counterfactuals allows us to tease out how these authors challenge the androcentric notions of gender in myth and history by focusing their imagination on the silenced, elided, and undermined stories of African women. My reading of Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) explores how using myth to unsettle history and history to unsettle myth uncovers complex stories of African women. Wartime novels such as Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019) and Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls* (2013) focus on the mythologising function of nationalist histories in which certain stories are elevated to a position of dominance and others are suppressed or ignored. Whether constructed by the author or simulated by female characters, counterfactuals in the two novels construct worlds where women's roles and experiences during wars are revealed. My analysis of Jordan Ifueko's *Raybearer* (2020) and Nnedi Okorafor's two novels, *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), explores the genre of speculative fiction as a flexible space for experimenting with the counterfactual framework in telling African women's stories through new forms of myths. The analysis shows that while narratives such as myth and history seem fixed and controlling, counterfactuals are valuable tools for unsettling their dominance.

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## Introduction

### Framing Myth in Diasporic African Women's Novels

Sources on the only Empress in Kunleo history were sparse and contradictory. Like all Kunleo girls, she had been raised in obscurity, away from the court. Some sources described her as fragile, weeping in secret beneath the weight of her reign, and leaning on the men around her for support. Other sources painted her as conniving, a vain and irrational shrew, caring only for her own survival. But neither of these portrayals supported the Empress's legacy. (Ifueko, *Raybearer* 373)

In *Raybearer*, Jordan Ifueko creates an imaginary empire, Aritsar, which is under hereditary rulership where men dominate social, political, and economic spheres. Even though women have played main roles including leading the empire in the past, their contributions are erased from official history. Furthermore, myths are created that justify their absence and paint in a negative light, women from the royal family (the Kunleos) who attempt to resist such erasures. The novel articulates the way histories are often contradictory and inaccurate, how sources disagree, and how gender stereotypes dominate. It reflects not only on how women's perceived inferiority is a consequence of a strategic silencing of their contributions that is sanctioned by dominant cultural and historical narratives; it also dramatises how counterfactuals—the “hidden private histories behind the official explanations of historical events” (Gallagher 2)—intervene to challenge dominant androcentric narratives.

In this dissertation, I examine how seven novels by diasporic African women writers engage different understandings of myth to reimagine representations of African women. The novels include Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014), Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019), Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls* (2013), Jordan Ifueko's *Raybearer* (2020), and Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) and *Who Fears Death* (2010). I argue that whether drawing on traditional myths, challenging the mythologising function of nationalist histories, or generating new forms of myths for the future through speculative fiction, these writers undermine the essentialist and patriarchal conceptions of the nation. They draw on historical facts and known figures in myths and history to create alternative narratives, which foreground the experiences and contributions of marginalised African women. In my analysis of the selected novels, I examine how through a strategic use

of counterfactuals the novels interrogate accepted wisdom and uncover misrepresentations of African women in cultural and historical narratives.

My selection of writers for this dissertation was initially based on my reading of their works as representing, contesting, or reinventing myth in different and fascinating ways. However, as I continued to engage with their works, I found it interesting that none of them are based in Africa, the predominant setting of their narratives. Makumbi and Mohamed were born in Uganda and Somalia, respectively, but both live and work in the United Kingdom. Gyasi, Mengiste, Ifueko, and Okorafor live and work in the United States. Gyasi is a Ghanaian, Mengiste is Ethiopian, Ifueko is Nigerian, while Okorafor is an American of Nigerian descent. These authors constitute the new African diaspora, a term that literary critic, Maximilian Feldner, writes has replaced ‘pan-Africanism’ in referring to the collective experiences of Africans living outside the continent. He notes that while African diaspora was initially a consequence of forced dispersals, the new African diaspora is a result of voluntary mobility in search of opportunities and to escape political situations in their home countries. Members of the new African diaspora are thus well-connected to their homelands and move freely between their host countries and the continent (15).

Literature coming out of this diaspora is not merely performing a nation-building role, it is also articulating the challenges of nationhood by reflecting the complexities of those living in the African nations as well as in other parts of the world (Feldner 16). This is what the Ugandan critic Bwesigye Mwesigire has conceptualised as a “contemporaneous postnation,” which is “at once postcolonial, nationalist, transnational, Afropolitan, and other labels” (103). The new African diasporic literature thus productively engages with their anti-colonial and nationalist predecessors and embraces hybridity of forms, drawing from Africa’s past and present realities as well as speculating future possibilities for the continent. Moreover, their works have benefitted significantly from the western publishing complex’s legitimation giving them visibility in the competitive global literary market. This also comes with recognition through prestigious literary prizes. For instance, Makumbi’s *Kintu* won the 2013 Kwani? Manuscript Project in Kenya and was longlisted for the Etisalat Prize for Literature in 2014. It was republished in the United States by Oneworld Publications in 2018 with a controversial inclusion of an ‘introduction.’ Gyasi’s *Homegoing* was listed for, and won multiple awards, including the Centre for Fiction First Novel Prize (2016) and the John Leonard Award (2016). Mengiste’s *The Shadow King* was shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, while Mohamed’s *The Orchard of Lost Souls* won the Somerset Maugham Award. She was also featured in *Granta*’s

2013 list of ‘Best Young British Novelists’ for *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. Ifueko’s *Raybearer* received significant critical acclaim in the US in 2020 and was named a New York Times bestseller. The text was also nominated for multiple awards, including the Nebula, Hugo Lodestar, and Ignyte awards in 2020 (Ifueko "Meet Jordan" n.p). Okorafor has won multiple awards for her works, most notably, the World Fantasy Award and Kindred Award for *Who Fears Death*.

Critics have argued that the above literary prizes and the fact that these texts are well-received in the West means that the Western publishing complex has significant control of stories that it wants to come from Africa. Therefore, the prizes abet the creation of a literary canon that isolates certain African stories (Kiguru 162). Feldner contends that the attraction in the West for African novels authored by diasporic Africans could be more about the desire to access Africa’s ‘exoticism’ that the texts are expected to offer (27). However, it is worth noting that the lack of publishing opportunities and critical acclaim for African women’s writings have been persistent challenges for women writers in the continent (Aidoo 516; Saadawi 520). Even though the publishing industry in the continent has seen remarkable growth and more women are getting published, the funding and awards from the West play a significant role in enabling the new diasporic African women writers to tell their stories in ways that productively engage the existing connection between Africa and the West. Their insider-outsider situatedness enables them to critique their respective nations in ways that expand the boundaries of contemporary diasporic African writing.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writings by Africans in the diaspora tended to respond to slavery, colonialism, and their consequences. The realities of African women as well as their misrepresentations in dominant narratives such as myths and nationalist histories were not given sufficient attention by both black studies and the “second-wave” feminist movements in America (Guy-Sheftall 28). This prompted a new group of twenty-first century diasporic African women writers to look backward to African pasts with a view to rediscover, celebrate and critique the place of women in such narratives. As I explain in more detail in the following chapter, counterfactual theory seeks to unsettle dominant narratives and ideologies in ways that intersect with African feminist traditions. The works of prominent African feminist scholars especially in the 1990s such as Odille Cazenave (10), Juliana Nfa-Abbenyi (15), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (33), Obioma Nnaemeka (263), among others, have interrogated how generations of African women writers in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries use creative works to rewrite African women from the margins to the centres of African myths and histories.

Reading the selected works by diasporic African women writers through the lenses of counterfactuals reveals a continuation of similar concerns. Literary critic Birte Christ has linked the counterfactual theory to feminist studies, drawing our attention to the core focus of feminist thought; the male/female binary and the stereotypes surrounding it. She further argues that the male gender is considered as the norm or ‘fact’ while the female “diverts from the norm—as the marked Other” (190), hence the ‘counterfact’. I agree with Christ’s contention that the notion of the male being the norm elevates their perspective—be it inventing traditions or writing history—as the authoritative version. According to Christ, counterfactual feminist fiction seeks to transcend this hierarchy of dominance to reorganise society into a state of utopia where gender binaries, which regulate the social distribution of power, are shattered. In such a society, men are no longer advantaged at the expense of women (190). The counterfactuals thus enable the creation of worlds where gender stereotypes are radically contested and dismantled. They can also potentially facilitate a continued engagement with the discourse of gender in Africa and its diasporas, uncovering the voices of female figures that have been erased. As I will explicate further in the next chapter, counterfactuals allow us to tease out how the selected novels demystify African pasts by unravelling the complexity of women’s place in myths and histories.

### **Myth in Contemporary Diasporic African Women’s Writings**

This section introduces the three understandings of myths that I adopt in this dissertation: myths as traditional tales through which people in African societies interpret their lives and relate to the world, nationalist histories as a form of myth-making, and science fiction as a literary genre that generates new forms of myths. As traditional tales, myth forms an integral part of the African traditional outlook or cosmology. Myths that transmit cosmologies across generations are considered divine and are thus popular, binding, and even sacrosanct. These are the events that happened before recorded history and explain the origins of communities and why things are the way they are. They, therefore, “reinforce the social and natural order” (Meletinsky 116). The formation of nations, which Benedict Anderson refers to as “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (4), relies on such order. Anderson explains that the nation is “an imagined political community” that is “both inherently limited and sovereign” (5). Its creation demands that people who identify with some stories, whether of origin or a shared experience, come together even when they do not know one another. Myths and similar narratives, such as legends, are therefore organic parts of a community.

However, some myths are also patriarchal spaces that “sanction social containment of or even violence against women” (Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan 2). This implies that when such myths are used in advocating for nationhood—the “deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7), the newly formed political community is often infused with such patriarchal notions of gender. For instance, most African myths of origin naturalise imagined gender hierarchies subjugating women, which have informed political structures in most post-colonial African nations. However, the late Nigerian scholar and one of the key voices in African feminist discourses, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, writes that even though the pre-colonial African past was replete with male domination, colonisation further complicated the position of African women by introducing new forms of patriarchal dominance (30).

The two texts I have selected for this understanding of myth—*Kintu* and *Homegoing*—continue a literary tradition in African writing, albeit with different goals. African writing has shifted its focus away from anti-colonial resistance and the ensuing nationalist clamours shortly after independence. These writings were male-dominated and focused on themes such as envisioning and encouraging unified identities and debunking notions of African inferiority and colonial perspectives of Africa (Kizza 8). Therefore, the writers who advocated for nationalism returned to myths to symbolise the African nations’ vitality and express disappointment at the new regimes.

While discussing the theme of regeneration in the writings of Wole Soyinka, literary critic Mary David reflects on his reconstruction of the contemporary world from the worldview of Yoruba mythology. She asserts that Soyinka’s retelling of the myths anew allows the Yoruba society to “rediscover and relive its origin” (7). This implies that for writers like Soyinka, the project was to uncover Yoruba folklore that might have been lost in the transition from orality to literacy and reimagining the society back to pre-colonial structures (Okpewho, *Myth* 263). The Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o does something similar in his writings. He appropriates the Agikuyu mythology by reimagining his native Agikuyu community and extending it to the Kenyan nation. As James Ogude tells us, the land question, which Ngugi covers extensively in his oeuvre, is legitimised by the Agikuyu myth of creation.<sup>1</sup> The use of the myth, Ogude notes, makes the land a contestable question both culturally and politically in the Agikuyu community and, to an extent, the Kenyan nation, where land restoration means a restoration of harmony

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<sup>1</sup>The Agikuyu myth traces the origin of the Agikuyu tribe of Kenya to Gikuyu (founder of the tribe), who was awarded a share of land by Mogai (Divider of the Universe) with a woman, Moombi (creator or moulder) as part of his gifts. See Kenyatta, Jomo Kenyatta, Jomo. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. Mercury Books, 1961, pp. 3-4.

and identity with which it was associated among the Agikuyu (46). Soyinka's and Ngugi's use of myths show how mythical frameworks can be utilised to narrate a nation's history and reinforce the meaning and the idea of the nation itself.

However, as the above generation of male African writers focused on inventing post-colonial and nationalist narratives, they overlooked the images of women in the myths they appropriated in the works. For instance, the Agikuyu myth of creation that Ngugi uses in his works gives women crucial roles as the creators and moulders of the community. However, this aspect of the myth does not get as much prominence in Ngugi's earlier writings. The omission of women in writings by the male writers is laid out succinctly by writers such as Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Nawal El Saadawi. Nwapa writes that only a few male writers like South Africa's Peter Abrahams in *A Wreath for Udomo* and Senegal's Ousmane Sembene in *God's Bits of Wood* attempted to "project an objective image of women" (528). She adds that the "Nigerian male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and Elechi Amadi, have in their earlier works played down the powerful role of women" (528). Nwapa's view is consistent with the African oral tradition scholar Florence Stratton's assertion that these male writers appropriated myths in their works in a manner that reiterated "the Manichean allegory of gender" (91) and perpetuated the subjugation of women. Women writers like Nwapa challenged the misrepresentation of women by their male counterparts by advocating for nationhood while reflecting, reinscribing, and celebrating the matriarchal heritage of her society (91).

While contemporary African writing has taken a different turn and has been described as postnational, Francis Ngaboh-Smart warns that the concept does not determine all contemporary African writing or reading even though it offers alternative ways of understanding African literature in a manner that contests the nation as a conceptual frame (xxi). The postnational writers thus borrow from an established tradition that is still useful in many ways. The recent turn to myths by contemporary women writers offers resistant alternative readings to traditional African myths. They render narratives that contest essentialist and often masculinist notions of gender using female characters that defy mythic conventions. Whether diasporic or living within the continent, such authors' works offer a selective manipulation of the mythic material with the aim of "questioning the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan 4).

My discussion on the understanding of myths as traditional tales pays attention to how the selected novels subvert the sacrosanctity of myths to portray African and Afro-diasporic women in a new light that reveals their resistance to patriarchal structures and affords them more agency. I consider the challenge of distinguishing historical facts from myths because of the overlap between the two narratives, especially in Africa, where both were transmitted orally before the arrival of Western forms of literacy. In *Kintu*, Makumbi treats the myth of Kintu as fact because it structures Buganda clans socially and politically and has a significant influence on the history of the kingdom and the Ugandan nation. I argue that Makumbi reimagines the myth by setting it in a historical context and subverting its masculinist notions in the process. *Homegoing* is based on a historical fact—transatlantic slavery. Gyasi creates an alternate history incorporating Akan mythological elements to represent women's experiences during slavery and its aftermath.

My second understanding of myth treats nationalist histories as forms of myth—the grand narratives created by the powerful that are often a blending of facts and fabrications (Selbin 49). These narratives are linear, closed, and attain the status of myth when they become the only acceptable versions of the past. Paul Cohen reminds us that even though historians always strive to counter the myths of the past, they often present just another form of mythologisation (83). The past is thus contested, implying that though history presents itself as the accurate representation of the past, no account can claim to be absolute fact but can only offer one version of the past. Nationalist histories do not just narrate the facts about the past; they try to perpetuate unified identities, cultures, and a sense of belonging with the endorsement of those who wield social, economic, or political power.

To discuss the mythologising function of history, I analyse two novels that narrate histories of war in two Eastern African nations: *The Shadow King*, which narrates the 1935–41 invasion of Ethiopia by Italian forces, and *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, which offers a glimpse of the 1988 coup in Somalia. The two novels take the official histories of these wars as the starting point of their narratives, then offer alternative versions that foreground women's experiences. Their excavation of the archive contests the historical fact as a way of healing the wounds of the past. One of the ways they contest the archive is by demythologising male historical figures, toppling them from the pedestal that nationalist histories have put them on, and looking at the past from the perspective of ordinary lives that have been side-lined in the quest for nationhood.

My third understanding of myth draws on the idea that science fiction is a “self-conscious form of myth in which [humankind] intentionally mythologises scientific narrative” (Sutton and Sutton 236). Here, I argue that the contemporary African speculative fiction writers incorporate mythical elements from the African world and create new myths that contest African nationalist frameworks. The writings I discuss under this understanding of myth require an expansion of the category of science fiction since they do not entirely rely on scientific narratives; they blend and bend genres, bringing together fantasy, magical realism, and making claims to realism. Science fiction is one of the key genres that seem to be most invested in imagining and narrating Africa’s possibilities “beyond the apocalyptic perspectives of hunger, drought, migration, war, and epidemic” (Bekolo 116). It imagines these as ideal scenarios by paying attention to the present realities and proposing ideal solutions, which may not seem plausible.

There are more contestations over terms and representations of Africa within the speculative genre. For a long time, Afrofuturism was seen as the branch of science fiction that focused on telling African and black stories. However, scholars have argued that Afrofuturism is limited in its representation of Africa and out of touch with the continent’s realities (Omelsky 35; Tosaya 37). Literary critic Sofia Samatar puts this more succinctly, contending that Afrofuturism emphasises blackness over nationhood and therefore embraces black futurists without considering their geographical locations worldwide. While this is all done in good faith, Samatar argues that the lack of attention to where various futurisms are coming from obfuscates the richness that a debate on multiple unique futurisms promises. She adds that such an obfuscation suggests that Africa did not have any form of futurism or futurists until 2000 (176).<sup>2</sup> African fiction, has however, been replete with themes of futurity with Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1956) and Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954) being the notable precursors to the current wave (Bryce 2).

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<sup>2</sup> African science fiction scholar Mark Bould writes that science fiction has always been used to tell African stories since its invention. He notes that science fiction tropes were used in early narratives that portrayed Africa as a place for lost races (9). The development of African science fiction has been changing ever since from focusing on salvaging the image of Africa from such ‘lost race’ narratives to fashioning its unique characteristics. This development has expanded the modes and scope of representation to include traditional African cultural values alongside futuristic science and technologies. The Kenyan film writer and director, Wanuri Kahiu, has reiterated similar sentiments and argues that African science fiction, and the notion of African futurisms are not necessarily new trends since Africans have always told their stories in ways that can be interpreted as science or speculative fiction. She contends that what is seen as a new trend can be attributed to increased access of other parts of the world to African stories. For women, however, she notes that the trend is useful in changing the negative image that has always been associated with Africa (Kahiu and Gueye, 1:20--3:12).



New, African-centred futurisms have been coined that draw from Afrofuturism but also go against its key philosophies. For instance, Okorafor has formulated two terms to describe her work: Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism. According to her, Africanfuturism is a brand of science fiction that explores African cultures and:

[i]s concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centred on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people). It is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with "what could have been" and more concerned with "what is and can/will be." It acknowledges, grapples with, and carries "what has been." (Okorafor, para.6)

The statement situates Africanfuturism at odds with Afrofuturism by its interest in Africa's ideal future and its past and present realities. This kind of futurism considers Earth as a place marked by borders and not "one star among others" (Samatar 176), as is the case with Afrofuturism. The differences between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism, as Arit Oku has rightly observed, are thus subtle but nonetheless significant (77).

Okorafor posits that Africanjujuism falls under fantasy and "respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative" (Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined" para.3). Given that Okorafor's protagonists are young women who are subversive, terming her form of fantasy as Africanjujuism speaks to a reconfiguring of contemporary African feminisms. The Nigerian scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, in a different context, writes that the "juju imaginary attempts to control the alienating and the inexplicable supernaturally" (7). She explains that in African societies that believe in Juju, like her native Igbo, women possess contradictory power: while they are deemed insignificant, they are also feared as witches who wield the power of Juju (10). Okorafor's conceptualisation of Africanjujuism incorporates this contradictory power into the speculative fiction genre and uses it to reimagine gender in African spaces, in general, and in Nigerian contexts, in particular.

Her oeuvre carries her vision above. Her works portray a hybrid of forms of speculative fiction, bringing together African mythologies, past and present realities, and using them to speculate on the continent's future. Young women at the centre of her worldbuilding go against powerful forces to contest various forms of societal injustices. Such characters include Ayodele in *Lagoon*, Binti in the *Binti* series, Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*, and Phoenix in *The Book*

*of Phoenix*. The other text I use to interrogate science fiction as a myth is Jordan Ifueko's debut novel, *Raybearer* (2020). Like Okorafor, her text has a strong sense of the African space but brings together a more straightforward blend of fantasy and magical realism to construct an alternate history. In all three novels, the female protagonists are endowed with jujuism alongside other powers, which they deploy to challenge the patriarchal world order. Whether drawn far from our realities or set in the near future, the texts create worlds that contest and even radically dismantle patriarchal notions of the nation.

All the authors I consider in this dissertation confront and unsettle authoritative narratives which have been given the status of history and fact. In the next chapter, in order to investigate the different ways they engage with these narratives, I explore the nexus between myth, history, and literature. I propose and discuss counterfactual theories as useful tools for understanding how these narratives reimagine African women by unveiling contrary, misrepresented, or elided histories that emphasise their roles and experiences. The next chapter also provides a chapter outline for the dissertation, paying attention to how the counterfactual approach informs an interpretation of each of the three understandings of myth I have outlined above.

## Chapter One

### **Myth and History in the Diasporic African Novel: A Theoretical Framework**

I see myself as a missionary in reverse: one whose job it is to teach African worlds on their own terms; a person whose job it is to teach Africa in ways that Africans themselves conceptualise their histories and their worlds. (N. Achebe ii)

This chapter outlines the theoretical concepts that I use to examine how diasporic African women's novels engage with the various understandings of myth as outlined in the introduction. I begin by exploring the origins of linear narratives such as myth and history, which are deliberately elevated to positions of dominance and thus influence every succeeding generation which sees them as sacrosanct. This process is primarily masculine and focuses on unified nationalist identities at the cost of women's histories and experiences.

I argue that the writers whose works I study in this thesis offer alternative narratives which invite us to imagine the past as nonlinear. By rendering these narratives through the perspectives of marginalised voices, they enrich, alter, unsettle, and challenge African histories. Therefore, my discussion in this chapter attempts to develop a framework that enables us to tease out from these novels aspects of the past that could have been real but are silenced by nationalist histories. In her novel, *The Shadow King*, Maaza Mengiste introduces a figure who is not Haile Selassie but takes his place at a certain moment in history. He is the 'Shadow King' who is present but also invisible. I want to generalise from this particular case, to propose the notion of 'shadow' or alternative histories to explore how the texts I analyse in this dissertation are themselves forms of resistance to nationalist myths and histories that often alienate women.

#### **Myth and African History**

Myth and history are similar in the sense that they are both explanatory narratives of past events. However, while myth is simpler, transferable, universal, and even sacrosanct, history is specific, detailed, and factual. Yet, in African historiography, specifically, the two seem to interact and influence each other. Africanist historian Jan Vansina, who wrote extensively on the history of central Africa, has argued that myths are religious and, therefore, are essential in explaining certain beliefs and events in history. He, however, warns that when treating them as historical sources, one has to be careful of inconsistencies with regards to dates because myths

can be transmitted across cultures (Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study* 157). He explains this further in another publication where he posits that most communities borrow each other's myths or tales of origin and infuse them with new images and objects, which change the myths over time (Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* 22).

This diffusionism points to the challenges of treating myths as historiographic sources. While one community may relate to the narrative as a myth, it could be another community's actual past. Vansina, however, contends that "traditions of origin should not be rejected out of hand. But, as best as one can, one should separate the logical construct and cosmological representation from what may be historical accounts condensed beyond easy recognition" (*Oral Tradition as History* 22). It means that despite the challenges of relying on myth or other oral traditions as history or in writing history, historiographic methods can be employed to sift the historical from the mythical. The mythical, in most cases, consists of a community's stories of origin and are less factual than the historical ones, which are stories of settlement and migration. The historical are linear narratives and may be infused with some myths and legends, but they are also the narratives that the historians are most interested in (Ogot 17).

For the late Nigerian cultural scholar Isidore Okpewho, there is a continuum that puts fact on one end and fiction on the other. He proposes this as a crucial tool for understanding the nexus between actual and fictitious pasts. Figure 1 below shows that every story can move between historical time and mythical time, becoming, along the way, either a historical legend, mythical legend, allegorical tale, or a fable (68). The movement, however, depends on the assumption that factual stories can become fictional with time. The left side of the arc represents the factual events based on the evidence available to the researcher, while the right side of the arc represents the fictitious. It means that the lesser the evidence to back up narrated events, the further they are pushed to the right side of the arc.

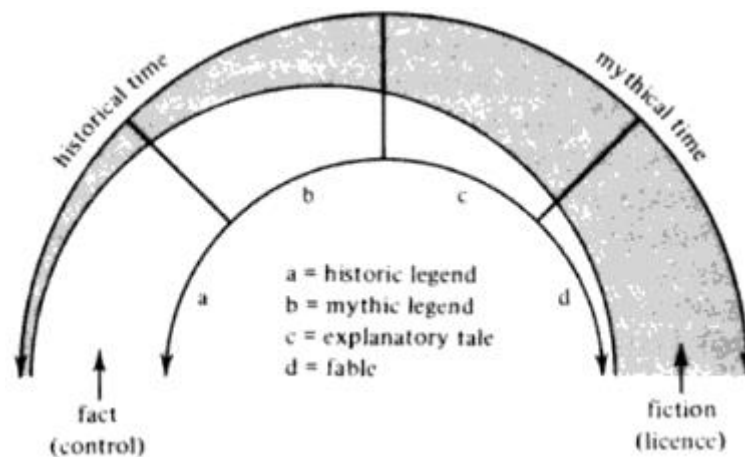


Figure 1: Reversible arc developed by Isidore Okpewho explaining the relationship between history/fact and poetry/fiction. Source: *Myth in Africa* (1983).

From the arc above, the historical time is represented by historical legend and mythical legend, with the former relying on evidence to back its factuality. Mythical legends are popular and believed to represent actual events from the past, but there is little to prove that such events took place. This side of the arc poses the most significant challenge to historians because some of the stories may sound plausible but may not have taken place in reality. Mythical time comprises explanatory tales and fables, which are both set in worlds that are not familiar to our own. They, however, tell stories that humans in the actual world can use to inculcate good morals. While Okpewho suggests that the far right of the arc can also be referred to as ‘fiction’, it is important to note that some fictional works, whether oral or written, are based on historical facts. The movement of stories from the left side to the right of the arc is left to the whims of the storytellers, which means they can change the stories as their social and political interests demand. This suggests that it is possible that a myth can originate from a historical event that is considered factual, especially when stories of such events are passed on orally.

Okpewho’s arc above deals with the content of both myth and history. For historians like Hayden White, the relationship between the real and the fictitious past is more complex because history is itself a narrativising of events or facts and therefore utilises the techniques of fiction to turn facts into a story. He argues that the fields of history and fiction interact in a complementary manner. The narrative is an essential mode of representing the past. Therefore, both the historian and the novelist always look for a way to relate the past so that their intended audience will understand and relate to it (‘Reflections’ 869; *The Practical Past* 94). Both writers of history and writers of fiction make use of narrativisation, but the writer of fiction has the greater artistic freedom to use imagination in rendering historical facts. White’s

propositions above are crucial in understanding the nexus between facts presented by the historian and those presented by the novelist. While historians rely on evidence to arrive at facts, they utilise fictional elements and artistic writing to render their findings as a story. The use of fictional elements does not render their stories less factual but acts as a means of storing and processing them.

History is often selective. Like fiction, it includes and excludes, consciously or unconsciously, and reflects the social and cultural biases of the historian. Historians such as Hayden White, Edward Carr and Paul Cohen hold the view that historians, by transforming facts into a narrative, always present a partial view (Carr 8; White, *The Practical Past* xiv; Cohen, *History in Three Keys* xiv). In nationalist histories, this partiality may be more pronounced and aims to advance *facts* that encourage a unified national identity at the expense of other stories. Linda Hutcheon a literary theorist and historiographer, has argued that “facts are events to which we have given meaning” (57). This implies that the power to select events and assign them meaning varies across any society. Those in positions of authority determine the facts or the official national history. However, the stories left to the periphery also hold a certain power because a section of the society has assigned them different meanings. Therefore, they are facts in their own right, thus rendering history incomplete (Selbin 49).

Social and cultural biases are evident in the writings of some post-independence Africanist historians who were concerned with contesting epistemic domination by Europe and creating nationalist histories. Oral traditions proved useful in these endeavours as they were crucial tools for disproving Europe’s exoticisation of the continent.<sup>3</sup> However, the focus on nationalism also saw women being obscured by history. This could have been deliberate or based on the sources and the informants they could access. For instance, the Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot, in *The History of the Southern Luo*, introduces his work by refuting the claim that Africa had no history, religion, or traditions (12). To access the Luo’s unrecorded or lost histories, he notes that he started by relying on the recorded histories of the Luo sub-tribes before convening a conference of elders in Kisumu, one of the towns in western Kenya. At this conference, Ogot

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<sup>3</sup> Historian Richard Reid has argued that the novelty that oral traditions offered African historians died shortly after independence when the quest for nationalism gained momentum. History then became a ground of contestation with the emergence of the centre (post-independence regimes and masculine histories) and a challenging periphery (political opposition and rising feminist voices) (Reid, “Ghosts” 351). As a result, African historians focused on relatively recent events—dating back to the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while ignoring the deeper past, a phenomenon he refers to as ‘presentism’ (Reid, “Past and Presentism” 136). By neglecting Africa’s deeper past, it meant that any research on this period went back to the same ‘biased’ history recorded by European historiographers and which Africans had initially sought to revise.

and the select-few elders agreed on what they considered the history of the Southern Luo. There is no evidence to argue that the elders Ogot selected for the conference were all men, except for his constant use of the pronoun ‘he’ when referring to his unnamed informants. This suggests two things; first, the only informants he could access and were ready to tell the history of the Luo were all men, and therefore his selection was not by design. Secondly, it also suggests that the opinions of men about Luo history were seen to be more accurate compared to those of women.

Ogot’s research on the Luo nation of Kenya is one of the most important contributions to Kenya’s history. This is demonstrated by the reverence the text has received from contemporary scholars focusing on East African history in general and the Luo in particular. His work exemplifies how nationalist historians—also called progressive traditionalists in Hobsbawm’s words—could have relied on Europeans’ forms of evidence and worldviews to write traditional African histories. The involvement of a few people who boast certain authorities and privileges, such as the elders, was therefore meant to iron out the distortions that may have resulted from a conflation of the mythical and the historical. Such conflations are common in the telling of pre-independence histories of African communities. For example, Buganda’s Kintu story has the myth of Kintu—stories of the origin of Buganda—and the legend of Kintu—stories about the establishment of the institutions and political structures of the kingdom. In most instances, the two narratives have been used interchangeably. This could be deliberate; Immaculate Kizza explains that this happened because one of the first kings of Buganda, desirous of aligning his position with the kingdom’s mythological father, Kintu, changed his name from Kato to Kintu (22). This demonstrates the centrality of griots—oral historians—in influencing how stories move from historical to mythical and vice versa along Okpewho’s continuum above. It also signals the creation of a hegemonic narrative, which then dominates society’s discourse on the past.

History can thus be mythologised. It is an ongoing process of narrating the past that is always open to revision if new information emerges; once history becomes a myth, it is no longer open to revision. It becomes the only acceptable version of the past. Eric Selbin has conceptualised this as History (with a capital H)—the myth created by the powerful and elevated as the objective and factual representation of the past (49). In this dissertation, I consider nationalist histories as the invention of the powerful and then elevated to the level of myth. Historian

Terence Ranger, following Eric Hobsbawm,<sup>4</sup> writes that African history was primarily an invention of colonialists. Following the Europeans' arrival in Africa in the late 1800s, they—mainly the British—sought to establish connections between their political, social, and legal systems with Africa by inventing new traditions. However, these inventions were based on command and control and aimed, in the colonialists' view, “to transform and modernise African thought and conduct” (220). At the centre of Ranger's arguments is the claim that Europeans' invention of tradition in Africa involved imagining or manipulating oral history through writing and later promoting those accounts to be hegemonic and static. The recording of the indigenous traditions was done by progressive traditionalists—European ethnographers and early African intellectuals—who were more interested in inaugurating new ideas and institutions into the continent. The indigenous customs were thus manipulated to enhance control, whether by Europeans or by elite Africans. Ranger tells us that the European model allowed various centres of power to use traditions to protect their economic, social, and political interests. These were the old versus the young, men versus women, the ruling class versus their subjects, and the indigenous population versus migrants (251).

Subsequently, the invention of traditions in most African communities created power hierarchies, including gender relations and stereotypes that barred women from competing economically and politically. According to Carol Ifeka-Moller, male African informants provided most of what Europeans recorded as African traditions. Women's experiences and beliefs went unrecorded. Thus, the perspectives of African men at that time helped advance the colonial-invented traditions and used the opportunity to create static customs that would inform the future and keep women in check (quoted in Ranger 258). Once presented as unchanging customs with a hegemonic status, these narratives about the past that, to a great extent, acted as instructions, were actively enforced by the colonial authority, again with the help of men. For instance, a woman reported for infidelity would receive a heavier punishment than a man because new myths had been created that portrayed men as the ‘fathers of nations’ who were thus allowed the freedom to have multiple spouses and offspring (258).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Hobsbawm, traditions are created by people identifying with certain practices and then attempting to influence others to subscribe and conform to such practices. The more such traditions are practised, the more they establish themselves as sacrosanct. More importantly, the repetitiveness of a tradition also leads to the formation of social groups—people who subscribe to the same practices and therefore believe that they have something in common such as ancestry, religion, or nationality. Hobsbawm further argues that some of what is considered as ancient past may have been created through “semi-fiction or by forgery” to make sense of certain historical contexts and thus ensure historical continuity (7). Inventing traditions, then, involves creating and recreating narratives to reflect the realities that society can easily identify with. Even with metaphysical beliefs, the constructions are always made with a focus on achieving certain ends.



Ifeka-Moller's arguments above explain Ogot's choice of elders, which I have discussed earlier, and are reflected by feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, who contends that the concept of gender did not exist in African oral traditions and considers it as one of Europe's colonial legacies in Africa (169). However, scholars like Paul Tiyambe Zeleza argue that the gender binaries could have existed before the Europeans' arrival and that "colonial patriarchal ideologies combined with indigenous patriarchal ideologies tended to reinforce women's subordination, exploitation and oppression" (223). Zeleza thus marries the two ideologies of gender and highlights how the historiographic processes were imbued with two levels of hegemony that both worked against African women in social, political, and religious structures. Ranger, therefore, urges that an objective understanding of the African past requires the historian to interrogate the interaction between the invented narratives about the past and the real history of Africa (259). This real history of Africa can only be found using new methods that utilise African-derived sources (Achebe 21).

In this section, I have shown that the literature has identified myth and nationalist histories as hegemonic and serving certain social and political interests, primarily masculine ones. In the next section, I explore a theoretical framework that will help us tease out how the authors whose works I discuss in this thesis uncover the elided and marginalised experiences of women in African nationalist histories.

### **A Counterfactual Approach**

The critical question the counterfactuals ask is 'what if?' In historical narratives, they hypothesise that if *x* had happened, the outcome would have been *y*. This outcome, in most cases, is contrary to the facts of history (Bulhof 146). Historians Phillip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin have defined counterfactuals as "subjunctive conditionals in which the antecedent is known or supposed, for purposes of argument, to be false" (4). They contend that the counterfactuals are unavoidable for scholars in disciplines such as history, where it is impossible to test their hypotheses and draw cause-effect relationships using controlled experiments. Therefore, they assert that counterfactuals are a "prerequisite for any form of learning from history" (6). For this reason, I find the counterfactuals useful in thinking about how the texts I discuss in this dissertation contest the linearity of nationalist histories and their masculine nature. The counterfactual theory provides a number of useful concepts for analysing, precisely, how history and myth function in these novels.

Counterfactuals have been used in history and other social science disciplines such as philosophy, political science, and psychology (Birke et al. 11). However, the field where the theory has generated the most debate is history, where scholars do not seem to find consensus on its usefulness. Political scientist Richard Lebow has stressed the importance of the counterfactuals to historians, arguing that they can help tease out some of the assumptions in history that aid our understanding of the past but are taken for granted (“Good History” 27; “Counterfactuals” 59). He contends that the constructions of both the factual and counterfactual history are entirely imaginary and are based on concepts and categories that reveal something useful or interesting about the world, which elevate the former to privilege (28). However, historian Mads Mordhorst argues that counterfactual history is methodologically flawed and has hit a dead-end in its contestation of history’s linearity and determinism. He thus proposes the concept of counter-narrative as a more useful tool in contesting hegemonic narratives. He transforms the counterfactuals by proposing that the signature question ‘what if?’ begin with stories about events and not the events themselves: “what if other stories had been told?” (5). In other words, Mordhorst suggests that a counter-narrative approach to history focuses on the stories that historians leave out either consciously or unconsciously.

With the use of counterfactuals in literary studies increasingly getting more attention, scholars do not seem to agree on whether Mordhorst’s counter-narrative is part of counterfactual history or a stand-alone method. Literary critic and theorist Catherine Gallagher proposes the following distinction of what counterfactual historical mode entails:

When I first started talking about the phenomenon, I found that the phrase implied many kinds of works I had not expected: histories that are simply fictional or even mendacious; “secret” histories that purport to explain the hidden private stories behind the official explanations of historical events; “counterhistories” stressing the forgotten struggles or viewpoints of those outside the mainstream; or imaginary histories that are “counterfactual” in the sense that they envision states of the world, usually utopias and dystopias, that might be, but have not yet been, realised. (2)

In other words, Gallagher suggests that imagining and uncovering lost histories or creating alternate worlds lack the definitive characteristics of the counterfactual-historical mode. She, therefore, excludes the above from the counterfactual-historical mode stating that she is interested only in those that include “an explicit or implicit past-tense, hypothetical, conditional

conjecture pursued when the antecedent condition is known to be contrary to fact” (2). This is when a writer deliberately takes a known historical fact, alters it, and then imagines the consequences of that alteration.

Based on the distinction above, Gallagher has identified two types of counterfactual novels: “alternate history” and “alternate-history novels” (3). On the one hand, she explains that alternate history novels depart from the historical record to invent counterfactual narratives where the historical figures, events, and names of places remain the same in the fictional world, but how they behave and interact, as well as the historical outcome, is contrary to what is known in the actual world (3). On the other hand, alternate-history novels bring together elements of fiction and counterfactuals and “allow for the illustration of a more complete alternative reality, presenting in detail the social, cultural, technological, psychological, and emotional totalities that result from the alterations” (3). In other words, this kind of counterfactual novel may fictionalise historical figures, events, and present an alternative outcome, but gives the reader enough hints to point out the historical context, which the author has used as the starting point.

From Gallagher’s arguments that ‘counterhistories’ can be forms of counterfactuals, I argue that Mordhorst’s notion of counter-narrative and George Lipsitz’s counter-memory, which are ways of challenging dominant narratives,<sup>5</sup> can all be treated as concepts within the broader understanding of the counterfactual framework. I draw from literary critic Andreas Martin Widmann’s postulation that a counterfactual history novel imagines alternative interpretations of the past without necessarily denying the facts of history as presented by historians but alters at least one “cornerstone” of what has always been formally accepted as fact (188). Widmann leaves room for diverse interpretations of what he means by a “cornerstone”, not restricting it to an alternative outcome. I, therefore, argue that the process or the means of getting to the same outcome as presented by historical records is equally an important cornerstone. A novel can contest the linearity of history by imagining alternative means of arriving at the same outcome. Thus, the process can determine the turning point that shapes a nation’s history and identity. For instance, the process in some novels in this dissertation, such as *The Shadow King*, involves how nationalist wars were won. However, the players who make such victories

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of fiction as a counter-memory has been postulated by George Lipsitz as a way of reworking History by offering alternative versions. It “focuses on localised experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience” (212). Lipsitz explains that while history focuses on unified and linear identities, fiction seeks to expand historical knowledge by bringing together what is considered factual with aspects of fiction.

possible in the novel are women, contrary to what is portrayed in nationalist histories. The players, in this case, are the ‘cornerstone’ of history that such a counterfactual novel alters.

The texts in this dissertation, however, do not all create utopian worlds to dismantle gender stereotypes. Some offer counterfactuals that expand history by bringing to life identities of women unknown or unrecorded by history. They give the reader a richer worldview by presenting such women as characters in works of fiction and reimagining their roles in different historical contexts—whether entirely imagined or based on reality. By excavating the past and reimagining it from the perspectives of lives thrown to the periphery by history, these texts provide African women with a way to engage with History “as both its authors and its subjects” (Mitchell and Parsons 5).

The discussion so far has defined the counterfactuals and established them as key in retelling the past more objectively. Even though the counterfactual framework is increasingly applied in literary studies, it is still a neglected area in African literature. Much of the scholarship on the counterfactual use in literary studies has focused on European literature to investigate alternative outcomes to specific historical events if certain things had happened differently. My immediate goal in this dissertation is to demonstrate how the novels by diasporic African women writers are instruments of criticism of the dominant discourse of African nationalism and how they challenge the masculine nature of such discourses.

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss some of the key concepts of the counterfactual approach that are useful for my analysis in this thesis. These concepts also consider how the reader’s position in relation to the actual and fictional worlds enable counterfactuality. In counterfactual historical fiction, for instance, the reader must be able to figure out contradictions or inconsistencies between the historical facts and the counterfactuals in a narrative. Even if the facts are contested and the reader’s knowledge is subjective, they should see themselves as being in the same realm and sharing some knowledge with the author. This knowledge enables them to understand the text’s starting point and the facts it attempts to counter.

## Possible Worlds

Counterfactual theorising has been linked with the Possible Worlds Theory, which traces its origins to Gottfried Leibniz.<sup>6</sup> Various scholars have explored this, including Brian McHale, Marie-Laure Ryan, Alice Bell and Catherine Gallagher. An extensive survey of the debate is beyond the remit of this dissertation. However, the agreement among these theorists is that the concept of possible worlds is a crucial anchor for counterfactual theory. Gallagher has noted that Leibniz's contribution to the counterfactuals is that he inspired a "new mode of being for all of those unrealised possibilities by locating them in 'possible worlds'" (18). She bases her typologies of the counterfactual texts that I have discussed above along the lines of the possible worlds proposed by Leibniz. Both alternate history texts and alternate-historical novels are written against the actual world. However, the two typologies also overlap with fictional worlds. Literary critic Riyutka Raghunath has also argued that the Possible Worlds Theory helps understand the "modal claims" as well as "interpreting the truth conditionals of counterfactual statements" (30). In other words, one can only evaluate the conditionals in counterfactuals if they juxtapose the events in one world with what is possible in another. Readers are likely to use the actual world as the starting point for such counterfactual comparisons.

Ryan has proposed a list of possible worlds in literary works which her two contemporaries, Bell and Raghunath, have also adopted. For this study, I will use Raghunath's version due to its currency concerning the application of the counterfactual theory in contemporary literary analysis. She presents the following:

**Actual World**—This is the system that exists physically. It is the world from which a counterfactual historical fiction text chooses events to alter.... **Possible Worlds**—These are the alternative worlds imagined by inhabitants of the actual world in the form of hopes, wishes, dreams, fears, and so on.... **Actual**

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<sup>6</sup> The Possible Worlds Theory is attributed to the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's *Theodicy*, a collection of essays published in 1710. He claims that the all-powerful Christian God, in His supreme wisdom and reason, made an infinity of worlds and then chose the best of these possible worlds for humans to occupy (131). Leibniz does not give evidence that these other worlds exist but believes that they can be constructed in the mind of any ordinary human as they go about their daily duties. He contends that God permitted the evil found in the present world because a balance of both good and evil is necessary to make our world the best of all the rest. He postulates that "one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian or Sevarambian romances: but these same worlds again would be inferior to ours in goodness" (132). Leibniz implies that achieving a utopian world may not be possible, but that such worlds can be imagined. This is what makes it an important tool for counterfactual literary analysis. Both the author and the reader can situate themselves within a particular world and offer social critique to the actual world.

**Universe**—This comprises the actual world and the associated possible worlds. **Textual Actual World**—This is the actual world created by any fictional text.... **Textual Possible Worlds**—These are possible worlds imagined by the characters of an associated textual world. These may be in the form of hopes, wishes, dreams, and fears. **Textual Universe**—This comprises the textual actual world (s) and its associated textual possible worlds. **Textual Reference World**—this is the autonomously existing world that contains all the information about the textual world and upon which the textual actual world is based.... **Referential Universe**—This is the system that contains the textual reference world (s). Every text has its textual reference world. (39 emphasis in original)

Counterfactual novels use the actual world as the starting point for their narratives. The events whose outcomes are altered are drawn from what is known to have occurred, which again takes us back to the point I was making earlier about the reader playing a central role in determining the counterfactuality of fictional works. In this dissertation, I argue that counterfactual historical novels utilise the possible worlds not just to render contradictory outcomes of actual events. Some of the possible worlds in the texts reflect the textual actual world and present a parallel chronology of events that narrate the past contrary to what is in the historical records of the actual world. Furthermore, the infiniteness of possible worlds means that worlds created in science fiction and fantasy can be appropriated by feminist thought to construct feminist utopias where gender binaries are dismantled.

According to Ryan, the idea of the counterfactual construction of possible worlds is to critique the actual world. Suggesting that something happened or imagining the possibility that it could have happened is to send a message about how close it could have impacted history. Therefore, counterfactuals can only make sense based on their truth value, which depends on their similarity to the worlds the reader is familiar with (48). In other words, in a counterfactual history novel, the textual actual world and the actual world must bear a close resemblance. The reader will then be transported to the new world but will juxtapose events between both worlds.

In science fiction and fantasy, however, once the reader is transported to the textual actual world, they find little reason to juxtapose events with the actual world because they have already surrendered themselves to the fanciful imaginations of the author. What makes the texts in this category counterfactual is their reference, albeit sometimes in minor details, to the actual

world. This brings the reader back to the actual world, and this is where the social critique of such works is seen more openly. In some instances, such as the first-person narratives in this study, the reader is left in the textual actual world as the narrator enters another possible world in a different realm. The reader has to wait in the textual actual world for the narrator to return and report the events from the other realm. This suggests another entirely inaccessible world beyond the textual actual world to which the reader is given access. However, authors of fantasy and science fiction make such a wait relatively short to enhance the continuity of the narrative.

Central to this thesis is the appropriation of mythological worlds in fiction by diasporic African writers to advance feminist thought. By unsettling these sacrosanct worlds and introducing new figures, these writers break into what Czech literary theorist Lubomir Doležel sees as a strictly demarcated boundary. Doležel, one of the exponents of the fictional worlds theory, argues that the mythological world operates between two domains, the natural and the supernatural. The two domains have clear and strict boundaries where the supernatural has access to the natural, but the natural world inhabitants are restricted from the supernatural domain. This inaccessibility, therefore, makes the supernatural domain mysterious and constantly a subject of curiosity to humans. To quench their thirst for knowledge about the supernatural, the natural world inhabitants rely on a few informers who claim a sense of authority and understanding of what is beyond humans. These may include religious leaders, prophets, seers, and other beings. No matter how unreliable their reports of the supernatural are, they get the attention of humans, and the information is passed on as myths in the form of narratives. Doležel adds that the hierarchy of power in the mythological cosmology determines how the two domains interact. Humans revere and fear the supernatural because the latter can always intervene in the affairs of the natural world either indirectly through mental influence such as dreams or adopting the physical body of a human in the natural domain. Such interventions are considered divine and disruptive to the natural domain, but they reinforce the narratives and beliefs of the mythological world (129-130).

From Doležel's postulations above, it is clear that appropriating a myth in a work of fiction with an intention to disrupt the myth's structure and figures means that it is an intrusion into a mythological world that is considered off-limits and sacrosanct for humans. The narrator, therefore, takes on the special role as an informer with special access to the supernatural domain to quench the reader's thirst for more knowledge of that realm. The Nigerian historian and feminist scholar Nwando Achebe tells us that the African world is dual in nature. People

recognise the existence of the actual or the physical world and the nonhuman or spiritual world occupied by supernatural beings, spirits, and ancestors. While humans have no access to the spiritual world, it is connected to the actual world to make one complete whole. The two worlds commune and are thus in constant interaction (26). Achebe further argues that the African God—who is neither male nor female—is out of bounds and is thus assisted by gods and goddesses who interact with humans through agents endowed with the ability to access the world of the spirits, communicate with the gods, and relay their message to other humans. She points out that these agents are appointed in a manner that recognises a gender balance such that a priestess serves a god while a goddess is served by a priest (29).

Achebe conceptualises African cosmologies in a useful way for a feminist analysis of counterfactual texts that utilise the worlds of myths. The notion of an ungendered God and a host of deities who choose servants on a gender-balanced basis radically reimagines the European concepts of religion, which has been used to structure African belief systems. Most origin stories in Africa portray men as the originators of the world. Therefore, a counterfactual feminist novel would follow Achebe's postulation and place both men and women as co-creators to portray a more representative gender relationship. In such a text, the narrator should ideally imagine and introduce the reader to other roles for women in the mythological world that contradict what the reader already knows about that myth.

Moreover, the appropriation of mythological worlds to a work of fiction means an additional world to the textual universe for the reader to interact with. First, there is the actual world of the reader, then the textual actual world, and finally the mythological world, which the narrative uses as its starting point. Given that humans, as inhabitants of the natural domain, treat this world as a mystery, the reader would be more curious about the mythological world because they do not have the slightest insight into it. I contend that it is uncommon to have a purely mythological novel because the author, just as the reader, has a knowledge deficit of the mysteries of the supernatural domain and therefore has to put some limits to their imagination. They thus introduce some aspects of the actual world to fill some gaps or just for the story's continuity. For instance, *Kintu*, which I discuss in Chapter Two of this dissertation, cannot be classified as a purely mythological text. While it is based on the myth of Kintu, a popular Buganda origin story, there is also much historical material from the actual world. In my discussion on *Kintu*, I argue that the interaction of worlds that the novel presents serves a specific feminist agenda by reflecting on gender relationships within the worlds and using it for social and political critique.



The preceding discussion has outlined how mythological worlds can be integrated into fiction for a specific agenda, such as advancing feminist thought. There is, however, some difference between how the mythological worlds work in realist fiction and speculative fiction. The difference is based on the reader's judgment of the narrative's plausibility. As I discussed earlier, the reader finds areas of convergence between their own reality and the textual universe in realist literature. Even though this also happens in speculative fiction, here, the reader is estranged from the created worlds. Darko Suvin, a key theorist in science fiction, has provided an important distinction between estrangement in other literary theories and science fiction. He draws on Viktor Shklovsky's concept of the attitude of estrangement, which is the introduction of new ideas and points of view to a normative system, thereby signalling new sets of norms (374). He conceptualises estrangement in science fiction as follows:

SF [Science fiction], then is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's [and the reader's] empirical environment. (375)

In other words, science fiction relies on empirical evidence to construct alternate worlds that satisfy our curiosity about unknown worlds. Even though the imaginary worlds may be unseen and strange, they come from objective projections of what can be expected based on the advances in science and technology. As used in the above statement, cognition—the ability to rationally discern—is the key difference between estrangement in science fiction and other forms of fiction. Suvin further explains that cognition here implies a reflection “of and on reality” and thus mirrors our world, not in its static form but to transform it (378).

Before moving on to how the mythological worlds and speculative fiction interact, it is worth pointing out that Suvin's explanation above applies strictly to science fiction, which he claims should not include fantasy and fairy tales. He contends that genres like fantasy should not be categorised together with science fiction because the latter is both literary and scientific at the same time (378). However, the authors in this dissertation seem to be doing something different and therefore utilise elements of both fantasy and science fiction. Authors like Okorafor have termed their work ‘Africanfuturism’ instead of Afrofuturism or African science fiction and ‘Africanjujuism’ instead of fantasy. I have explained these in the introduction. These texts utilise African myths and cosmologies alongside science and technologies. This sets their mode of speculative fiction apart from Suvin's canonical gatekeeping above, which demands that science fiction must only project alternate worlds on the basis of ‘science.’ The rise of the genre

as a site of African cultural production attracts writers who do not expressly identify as science fiction writers because it allows them to imagine and summon what Pamela Phatsimu Sanstrum refers to as “missing people”—those who do not exist but are creatively constructed (144). The African form of the genre projects an alternative world to speculate on the conditions necessary to call into being a particular kind of a person whose presence in the world is needed but who appears not to exist. Such figures are then located in spaces where their presence becomes central in reimagining and challenging the conventions of dominant ideologies.

Several studies have shown how African science fiction has helped imagine African realities before and after independence and even project it into the future. The genre has captured African people’s socio-cultural, economic, and political aspirations in the wake of the post-independence clamour for nationalism. The disillusion with the post-independence nations prompted African writers in this genre to reimagine the continent anew, considering the social and political challenges most of the new nations were facing and cautioning leaders of the impending consequences of their actions (Adejunmobi 266; Bekolo 116; Eatough 237).

Diasporic African speculative fiction writers build on these earlier concerns and draw on fixed and sacrosanct African mythological worlds either directly or indirectly. While the mythological worlds are static, the worlds of speculative fiction are flexible and even prophetic. Authors of speculative fiction enjoy the freedom to stretch the limits of their imaginations by constructing worlds that may be far from plausible. Even then, these worlds aim to perfect the actual world of the reader, whether they are utopian or dystopian. The reader is either warned on what to do or not to do to make the actual world better or presented with an ideal environment they should strive for. According to Lawrence Coupe, the worlds created by speculative fiction may promise a better world than the present reality (9).

Speculative fiction, therefore, as a site for the experimentation of counterfactual thought, can either look backwards to the past—this is where aspects of real histories and mythologies seeping into the texts—or projected to the near or distant future. Cultural studies scholar, Matt Hills, tells us that:

Science fiction does not restrict itself to imagining different outcomes for world-historical events... [its] use of the counterfactuals is...one way in which it can destabilise ontological perspectives and compel readers to see the ‘real’ historical world in different, perhaps more critical ways. (437)

In other words, even though the textual actual worlds of speculative fiction may seem far from plausible, they are a potent space for counterfactual imagination. They are among the many possible worlds that can be imagined, which give both the reader and the author a vantage point from which to critique our world “empirically and normatively” (Lebow, “Counterfactuals” 67).

I argue in this dissertation that diasporic African women writers of science fiction appropriate African mythological worlds in their works in specific ways and for specific purposes. They use their writing as a form of cultural reference to establish a connection between themselves and their readers. It is worth noting that the texts in this study can all be classified as Young Adult Science Fiction (YASF), a genre that, for African literature, is mainly associated with writers living in the West. According to Kay Sambell, YASF has seen immense growth over the years and has developed clear and identifiable concerns by drawing on fantasy and current trends to represent the future “as a terrifying nightmare that child readers must strive to avoid at all costs” (247). The genre’s popularity, especially in America, makes it equally an important avenue for connecting young diasporic Africans to African mythologies and cosmologies.

However, this connection encourages multiple identities that challenge the linear nationalist identities that the same myths have been used to achieve in the past. In other words, these texts advocate for cross-border citizenship and suggest that the essence of being an African is not restricted to a specific national identity. To advance this agenda, the new speculative fiction, specifically YASF, also construct its own myths, which are closely related to actual African (real-life) worlds. These mythological constructions are influenced by African myths alongside trends in science and technology and creatively ‘prophesy’ how our world may look in the near or distant future. The textual actual worlds created out of this are thus both a repository of African content and a counterfactual rendering of African myths that eliminates gender stereotypes.

The speculative texts in this dissertation operate within the broader corpus of feminist science fiction, which Ritch Calvin conceptualises as seeking “to highlight, challenge, or alter social, cultural, and political structures regarding sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and ability” (21). Feminist science fiction, as Calvin posits, embraces pluralities in cultures and thus fits into diasporic African women’s writing’s appeal for a more fluid sense of nationalism. Other scholars such as Susana Morris and Patricia Melzer have conceptualised what can be considered key tenets of science fiction feminisms. Morris proposes Afrofuturist feminism, bringing together the key concept within Afrofuturism and black feminist thought (155). In

contrast, Melzer argues that cyborg feminism may help us analyse the different “ways in which corporate capitalism, technoscience, and cyberspace, as social, economic, and political factors, affect women’s lives and reshape subjectivities” (22). Both of these tenets work neatly with the counterfactuals in rendering alternate worlds with new realities where the female protagonists contest gender relations.

To understand how readers interact with different worlds in a counterfactual historical novel, theorists have proposed various concepts. For instance, the principle of minimal departure states that “we reconstrue the central world of the textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representation of the AW [actual world]” (Ryan 51). In other words, the reader is expected to recognise and associate specific characteristics of the actual world with the indications and evidence supplied by the textual actual world. The historical figures, events, and places may not be mentioned, but the reader will use the hints to contextualise the narrative. Some texts, however, dictate when a reader should adjust and stop associating their actual world with the textual actual world (Ryan 52). The principle of minimal departure thus invokes a frame of reference that “is not the sole product of unmediated personal experience but bears the trace of all texts that support and transmit a culture” (Ryan 54). In other words, the principle of minimal departure utilises all facets of cultural production in the actual world.

### **Counterpart Theory, Transworld Identity and the Rigid Designator**

These concepts attempt to explain the complex question of identity in counterfactual narratives. They can help us understand and process the references to the actual world in a work of fiction. According to the philosopher David Lewis, possible worlds have their own sense of realism and are, therefore “respectable entities in their own right” (*Counterfactuals* 85). Lewis rejects the notion that a person in the actual world can exist in another possible world and proposes the counterpart theory to explain the existence of identities that bear close resemblance in different worlds. These are not the same individual but counterparts who are different and confined to the worlds they inhabit. They are possible versions of the same individual in the actual world—the people they could have been if they had existed in those worlds (Lewis “Counterpart” 114).

Transworld identity has its origins in philosophy and was developed in response to Lewis’ counterpart theory, contending that different versions of a person exist in more than one of the several possible worlds. According to philosopher Nicholas Rescher, the “one self-same

individual can reappear in different descriptive guises in different possible worlds. It accordingly becomes necessary to distinguish between two versions of what it is to be a ‘single individual’” (88). Rescher suggests that the existence of other selves of a person in other possible worlds is indisputable. What is needed is a way to understand these other selves and how one co-exists with them. As literary theorist Ruth Ronen has argued, transworld identity presents a problem when dealing with worlds that are not in the same logical domain. Therefore, a more straightforward application of the concept would be when dealing with worlds where occupants of the actual world have access to knowledge of the other possible worlds (59).

Transworld identity’s application in postmodern fiction slightly departs from Rescher’s arguments above and invokes a connection between the textual actual worlds of two different texts or other accessible worlds. It occurs where one character, for instance, is used by the same author in more than one text or is borrowed by another author. It also occurs when a historical figure from the actual world appears as a character in a textual world (Eco 234; McHale 57). Transworld identity can also be a crucial tool in explaining how writers of speculative fiction, for instance, Okorafor, utilise recurring characters who perform different roles in different texts. Textual worlds, and even the actual world they reflect or reimagine, can be considered to be on the same logical domain, given that the reader is considered to have reasonable access through knowledge of them.

In the interaction of possible worlds, the counterpart theory and transworld identities can only be realised if the individual is assigned the same proper name in all the possible worlds. This is what the logician Saul Kripke calls a “rigid designator” (48). He argues that a non-rigid or accidental designator is where a different name is assigned to an object with perceived similarities with another object in the actual world. A proper name is an explicit means of rigid designation, while contextual information and personal attributes are implicit rigid designators (49). Alice Bell tells us that “using a proper name as a form of rigid designation is attractive because it allows a particular individual to be intuitively invoked while also allowing changes to be made to that individual’s properties” (123). The use of rigid designators in counterfactual novels allows the authors to render alternative narratives about the same figure in different worlds. Such narratives may not be known but are worth considering or a way of demythologising the figure from the pedestal that they have been put by dominant narratives such as myth and history. Therefore, a rigid designator draws our attention to something about such figures that the author wishes to foreground or challenge.

In some of the novels in this thesis, such as *The Shadow King*, there are recognisable figures like Emperor Haile Selassie from Ethiopia. A reader with prior knowledge of the history of Ethiopia would recognise such a figure and the historical contexts from which the author draws him. Even though fictionalised, little is changed about his roles, which allows the reader to juxtapose both worlds and spot any alterations. This is made possible by the principle of minimal departure. It also shows how the concepts of counterpart theory and transworld identity may function together in counterfactual fiction. The above figures in the actual world history are counterparts to the same figures in the textual actual world, but they are not the same people. Bell explains that, as counterparts, they are connected ontologically—their existence in the actual world—and linked through epistemological relation—the knowledge of the shared properties between the two versions of characters (74). The reader, however, knows them because they have been assigned the same proper names—rigid designation—in the textual actual world and the actual world.

Another aspect of counterfactuals that deals with the question of identities is characterological counterfactuality, in which one character may alternate between male and female genders at different times. Christ has argued that this is one of the crucial tools for counterfactual feminist analysis. The ability to change genders at alternate times enables the character to acquire and express the perspectives of men and women (203). Characterological counterfactuals have also been used as an umbrella term for transworld identity and counterpart theories (Dannenberg 121). This concept is instrumental in analysing speculative fiction novels where characters may not necessarily change their genders but can shapeshift and travel in time. For this study, for instance, characterological counterfactuality will provide a valuable reading of one of the radically feminist scenes in Okorafor's text, *Who Fears Death*, where the female protagonist kills all the fertile men in a town and bestows all fertile women with pregnancies.

### **The Disnarrated**

As the discussion so far has shown, at the centre of the counterfactual theory are events that may have happened but did not and are thus imagined in works of fiction. Sometimes, however, events that have already been narrated as what took place may be discarded and a new version or new information about the events introduced to enhance the reader's understanding of such events. This is a narrative strategy that the American theorist Gerald Prince, in a 1988 essay, called the disnarrated. He eclectically defines the term as:

[E]vents that do not happen, but nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text. [They can also be] alethic expressions of impossibility or unrealised possibility, deontic expressions of observed prohibition, epistemic expressions of ignorance, ontologic expressions of nonexistence, purely imagined worlds, desired world, or intended worlds, unfulfilled expectations, unwarranted beliefs, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations, errors and lies, and so forth. (299-300)

From the above passage, disnarration is a narrative tool that can be utilised variedly. As Prince explains, I argue that within a work of fiction, for instance, disnarration would be said to have occurred when the narrator disrupts narration to contradict what has already been narrated as part of the story. This can be explicit in that the narrator may declare unequivocally that certain events did not pan out as they have been narrated. They can also be implicit because the narrator can use certain words that suggest that what has been narrated is untrue or inaccurate. Disnarration, therefore, gives more power to the narrator to interfere with the straightforward narration of events, either by adding or discarding some information from the narrative. This disruption creates an alternative version of events within the story, which the narrator may suggest or even directly persuade the reader to consider as the accurate version. It is thus a way for the narrative to fact-check its own textual actual world.

Disnarration can also be applied beyond a work of fiction, and this can happen when the text fact-checks external worlds. In creating possible worlds, the narrator can utilise facts from the actual world, stories from the mythological worlds, or textual actual worlds from other works of fiction. The intention may be to rewrite such narratives or to use them to explain the ongoing narration. This may be called external disnarration or counterfiction, where a narrative sets out to utilise another text's fictional worlds or characters to rewrite it (Saint-Gelais 243; Ryan 169). For this study, however, I refer to such a phenomenon as external disnarration. It is broader and allows me to analyse the interaction between fact and fiction in the texts in this thesis. Some of the texts in this study appropriate historical facts, myths, and other works of fiction. Disnarration is, therefore, a useful tool for reading and unpacking how they foreground women's roles and experiences by adding or discarding how dominant narratives portray women.

Literary theorist Marina Lambrou, following Prince's definition of the disnarrated above, has argued that excluding minor characters in realist fiction can also be classified as an important aspect of disnarration. She considers minor characters as people whose participation in certain historical events is not worth telling or worth naming for whatever reason the writer may have. These may include soldiers who played minor roles in wartime narratives (20). In other words, Lambrou suggests that misrepresenting some players in specific historical moments by realist fiction is to disnarrate them from such discourses. Nationalist histories do something similar when it comes to representing women in History; their involvement is disnarrated, and their experiences are reduced to victimhood in most cases. In counterfactual novels, however, disnarration brings to the fore such forgotten or deliberately elided stories. Prince tells us that the non-events that disnarration introduces into a narrative are an "important means of emphasising tellability: this narrative is worth narrating because *it* could have happened otherwise, because *it* usually is otherwise, because *it* was not otherwise" (302 emphases in original). In other words, tellability justifies why a story is worth telling in different contexts. Disnarration, therefore, acts as a reminder that a particular story has not been narrated but is worth bringing to the reader's attention. In a text like *The Shadow King*, the narrator breaks the narration and directly addresses the reader explaining or reminding them of an aspect of the story that may have been narrated or not.

The aspect of the disnarrated as expressions of "unfulfilled expectations, unwarranted beliefs, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations" (300) has been taken up by psychologists as a way of understanding traumatic memory. They have identified a new method—Matrix Reimprinting—as a way of doing away with the imprints of traumatic events left in human memory after such events and generating possible positive outcomes. The counterfactual images that a person constructs greatly affect how they react to the negative event that has occurred to them (Dalglish 1215; Davis and Lehman 355). This has been readopted by literary theorist Hilary Dannenberg who argues that it is a useful technique that can be utilised in literary studies. She states that:

[T]rauma victims able to rewrite their own traumatic memories indicate the negative associations with a real past event [and] can be released by imagining a fully fictional alternative scenario, notwithstanding the ultimate knowledge of this fictionality by the individual concerned. (309)



In other words, disnarrating real negative events from victims' memories and replacing them with positive, happier (and yet fictional alternatives) can help them cope with the trauma. Disnarration can help people think of what they would have wanted to happen instead of what actually happened and caused them the trauma. Dannenberg adds that the human mind has the power to retain a sequence of events, which means that there are always two versions of the self for one person: the past and the present (310). In counterfactual history novels, this aspect of disnarration is useful in teasing out shadow narratives from what the characters imagine in their minds. This narrative, I argue, potentially tells a different history of the places that the story reflects.

In some of the novels in this study, such as Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, for instance, the simulated scenarios by the female characters are avenues to a different version of history. These scenarios can either be positive or negative depending on whether they are simulated by the victim of trauma or their support giver. While the victim of trauma may imagine scenarios whose outcomes would have been positive, their support givers may simulate negative scenarios where the victim would have had no power to influence the outcome of events. In other words, as the trauma victim attempts to disnarrate actual events by replacing them with what did not occur, the support givers disnarrate the victim's simulated scenarios, rendering them more destructive to the victim. Disnarration, applied this way, is an invocation of "nostalgia ('something was there, but is no longer'), hopefulness ('something might be there, but is not yet'), or a sense of bare absence ('something never was and never will be there')" (Warhol 232). These are useful in understanding how victims of trauma cope and how the unmentioned events, people, or places tell an alternative history of the female characters.

Throughout my discussion in this thesis, I will demonstrate that the binaries and comparisons that the counterfactuals offer can be utilised to tease out how diasporic African women novelists' engagement with myth in diverse ways gives agency to marginalised voices in myth and nationalist histories, especially African women. I open the discussion in Chapter Two with an examination of how the counterfactuals are utilised in Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. Both texts include historical facts from the actual world but use these, on the one hand, to challenge a powerful myth about a patriarchal origin story and, in effect, create an alternative history. On the other hand, they create a myth that situates historical figures within mythological worlds where more roles for women are possible. *Kintu* appropriates the Kintu story—a popular Buganda myth of origin while also incorporating figures from the

history of Buganda and Uganda. In *Homegoing*, the author uses Akan mythology and the history of slavery in Ghana to create a female-centred myth. It is worth noting that the two texts are based on historical and archaeological research by the authors.

Chapter Three discusses Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. The two novels are set in specific periods of war in Ethiopia and Somalia, respectively, which were the turning points in the national histories of the two countries. I examine how they challenge nationalist histories and identities by constructing counterfactual textual worlds where women's roles and experiences during wars are revealed. *The Shadow King* is based on historical research in the Italian archives where the historical record of women's roles in the war is ambiguous or missing. The author relies on photographs and oral sources whose fictionalised descriptions are the backbone of the story. Only Emperor Haile Selassie and the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-1941 are taken from the actual world, and the other characters are fictionalised. I argue that the photographs, although themselves direct traces from the actual world, enable a counterfactual history of the war. I then explore the possibility of songs and choruses in the novel as aspects of disnarration, given that they negate some facts within the textual actual world and the actual world, Ethiopia. The text thus produces a shadow history in which the outcome of the war remains the same, but the process is different, and women play a central role in defeating the Italian troops, contrary to existing histories. In *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, I examine a different use of the counterfactuals. Even though the novel is set in an actual period in Somalian history, none of the characters is from actual world history. My discussion examines how the key female protagonists who have undergone traumatic experiences of war simulate counterfactual scenarios that help them cope by disnarrating the real painful experiences that caused the trauma. Although fictional, I argue that these alternative scenarios draw our attention to an alternative history that is absent from the nationalist discourse.

Chapter Four discusses Jordan Ifueko's *Raybearer* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*. I examine speculative fiction as a subgenre that arises from counterfactual fiction's subversion of boundaries of literary genres. Both authors use elements from the actual world to create their alternate worlds. In *Raybearer*, I discuss how the narrative models a counterfactual history to the alternate world created in the text. This counterfactual history radically reimagines the past by endowing women with the ability to recover histories that have been suppressed, especially those of women. Okorafor's counterfactual worlds in *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix* reflect the actual world and offer a radical

reimagination of history and gender relationships. Even though *Who Fears Death* is set in a distant future Africa, it references the actual world through the history of technology in which computers are part of obsolete relics of early technologies. *The Book of Phoenix*, in contrast, is set in a futuristic world where advances in technology have led to the exploitation of African bodies. I will, therefore, use various concepts of the counterfactual theory such as characterological counterfactuality and transworld identity to discuss how the female protagonists in both novels overcome the patriarchal obstacles to give their respective worlds what they believe can be a fresh start.

This theoretical chapter has established that the counterfactual understanding of the past treats it as a fusion of what happened and the imagined ‘what could have been’. This fusion destabilises the dominance of narratives such as myth and history, making the counterfactuals a useful way of engaging with the ‘official’ narratives, which are biased and oppressive in some instances. Even then, this engagement with history is not meant to reject it upfront as lies, merely to weaken its hegemony. Therefore, there are at least three ways counterfactuals work in the novels I discuss in this thesis. First, the authors take actual historical events as the starting point of narration in their texts, then imagine a different process of achieving the same outcome. This includes introducing new figures that are previously elided by history as central players in such achievement. They thus give marginalised voices a say in history. Secondly, the counterfactuals are simulated in the characters’ minds, disnarrating in the process traumatic events and replacing them with positive and favourable ones. Thirdly, the authors create alternate worlds where more roles for women are possible. Though still in its early stages in African literary studies, I propose that counterfactual theory is a promising framework for expanding African feminist studies. In the following chapters of this thesis, my analysis will test the integration of counterfactual theories into traditional literary theories that have been applied to African literature.

## Chapter Two

### Retelling Myths, Reconfiguring The (Post)Nation

Let's tell this story properly: there is another woman in this story. (Makumbi, *Manchester* 226)

In 'Let's Tell This Story Properly', one of the short stories in Jennifer Makumbi's *Manchester Happened* (2019), a group of women who have come to console the widow, Nnam, intervene in a family dispute between her (Nnam) and her late husband's family. The source of the conflict is the double life that the late husband had been living. His wife, with whom he has been living in Manchester, does not know that he has another wife in Uganda who is recognised as official as per Buganda traditions. The man's extended family in Uganda is also shocked to discover that he legally married another woman in Manchester. A majority of the women who have come to console Nnam are all returnees from Manchester and have undergone similar treatment. They know that Nnam will be humiliated and dispossessed without anyone listening to her side of the story if they do not intervene. The declaration by one of them that: "Let's tell this story properly. There is another woman in the story" (259) disrupts the family's one-sided story that does not recognise Nnam and is supported by traditions. Their disruption invites a multiplicity of stories, eventually establishing the truth that Nnam's money was used to build the family home in Uganda where the man's other wife lives.

The women's insistence that the story needs to be told properly speaks to the focus of this dissertation in general and this chapter, in particular, because it reflects a specific type of patriarchal tradition informed by myths of origin that silences women's contribution, be it in marriage or the nation. This chapter explores this dissertation's first understanding of myth as a traditional tale which provides women writers with a framework to uncover elided women's stories in dominant cultural memories. I discuss how Makumbi's *Kintu* recasts the story of Kintu—a popular Buganda creation myth—as a historical event that she retells to accord women agency. Through the rigid designator, Makumbi destabilises the figures and images of the myth, unpacks the elision and silencing of women in the original myth, and reinserts them in Buganda's and Uganda's collective memories. In contrast, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* creates a new myth out of the histories of slavery and colonialism in Ghana as a way of uncovering women's experiences during these periods. While the text struggles to engage directly with the Akan mythic material, I argue that a counterfactual reading allows us to tease out myth creation through one of the key characters' dreams.

## Re-mythologizing Buganda and Uganda in *Kintu*

*Kintu* won the 2013 Kwani? Manuscript Project run by a Kenyan publisher, Kwani? Trust and was subsequently published by the same publisher in 2014. The project was undertaken as a wider effort by the Nairobi-based publisher to publish and market African authors interrogating and telling stories rooted in African traditions. *Kintu*'s focus on Buganda's oral traditions and history makes it a defining text in the Ugandan literary scene. It offers a refreshing approach to the country's contemporary issues such as women's exclusion in leadership, homosexuality, and the HIV scourge, by reflecting on its past. The novel notably skips the colonial period in the East African nation, beginning in 1750, jumping to the 1970s, and ending in 2004.

This section of the chapter is interested in how *Kintu* undercuts the Buganda myth of creation by telling an alternative version as a way of 'telling the stories properly.' Makumbi recasts the popular Buganda androcentric myth as a historical event. She then mythologises the event, unpacks female figures' silencing, and assigns them new roles contrary to what the original myth and the history of the Buganda kingdom portray. I argue that by counterfactually reworking the myth of *Kintu*, the novel desacralises it and reveals that women in Buganda's past have more complicated histories than what the masculine narratives have always presented.

*Kintu* tells the story of Kintu Kidida (Kintu), a provincial governor (Ppookino) of Buddu and the ancestor of the fictional Kintu clan. The novel is structured in six sections labelled 'books.' The curse of Kintu, which constitutes a series of misfortunes such as death and mental illnesses, is introduced in the prologue where one of Kintu's descendants is murdered by an angry mob that mistakes him for a thief. When his killers are found dead a few months later, the locals, who believe in the Kintu curse and witnessed Kamu's murder, believe they were right when they warned that killing a descendant of Kintu is to raid a "deadly colony of bees" (*Kintu* xix). 'Book I' then transports us back to Buddu Province in the Buganda Kingdom, where it narrates the story of Kintu Kidida and the origins of the curse. The novel begins with him preparing to make a journey to the kingdom's capital to express his allegiance to the new *Kabaka* (king). Along the way, Kintu accidentally hits his adopted son, Kalema, after he finds him drinking from his gourd. While he intends to hit the gourd and save the boy from a traditional taboo that comes with drinking from a governor's gourd, the boy falls and dies. He keeps his death a secret, prompting the boy's biological father, Ntwire, to curse Kintu and his descendants. The origin of the curse is thus a conflict between two men, Kintu and Ntwire.

The other sections of the novel, Books II, III, IV, and V, narrate the lives of Kintu's descendants as they go through various afflictions that they believe are a result of the Kintu curse. These sections also mythologise the events, images, and characters in 'Book I.' Among Kintu's descendants, there is Suubi, who is constantly visited by the spirits of her dead twin sister, Babirye. Then there is Kanani, a member of a radical Christian group, 'Awakened', who has severed ties with his blood relations for refusing to leave their traditional ways for Christianity. His twin children end up siring an incestuous child, Kalema. Isaac Newton, another descendant of Kintu, has a troubled childhood that delays his growth. Finally, Miisirayimu Kintu (Miisi) is the Cambridge-educated neo-traditionalist chosen by the spirits to lead the clan's homecoming. 'Book VI' brings together all these descendants in a homecoming to broker peace with the spirits of their ancestors to avert the various manifestations of the mythical curse they believe themselves to be experiencing.

Makumbi indicates her revisionary intention by strategically introducing the novel with an epigraph containing a quote from one of John Hanning Speke's travelogues, drawing our attention to the destructive way mythology can work. The quote states:

I profess to describe naked Africa... If the picture be a dark one, we should, when contemplating these sons of Noah, try and carry our mind back to that time when our poor elder brother Ham cursed by his father, and condemned to be the slave of both Shem and Japheth; for as they were then, so they appear to be now—a striking existing proof of the Holy Scriptures. (qtd in *Kintu* x)

The passage above exemplifies how a dominant narrative—in this case, Christian mythology—can be misinterpreted to undermine and violate certain groups of people. Similarly, the Kintu myth is influential among Buganda and perpetuates a patriarchal framework that undermines women. Therefore, a counterfactual analysis of *Kintu* considers the masculine nature of the Kintu myth and how it enforces the idea of the clan as a *fact* of the Buganda social life. The *counterfact* is Makumbi's reimagining of women within the contexts of the myth and the histories that it influences. Her intervention—"re-mythification" (Kwanya vii)—constitutes moments of telling stories of the nation holistically—'properly'.

In an interview with Charlotte Cooper for *New Writing North*, Makumbi reiterates that Buganda's oral traditions inspired her to tell Ugandan stories before the arrival of colonialism. She considers oral forms as "complex coded forms and deposits of history" (para.4) and believes going back to them may provide answers for some of the contemporary issues that

Uganda tries to grapple with. In another interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Makumbi tells Alexia Underwood that she used the Kintu myth to consider how various ethnic groups in Uganda have related to one another after independence. She adds that the myth “is not just about the beginning of society, but also the beginning of a society’s creativity” (para.2) and that using a masculinist myth such as the story of Kintu provided her with an opportunity to show how patriarchy also oppresses men even when it appears to privilege them. In the two interviews, Makumbi suggests that her writing attempts to integrate the oral and realist genres to come to a new understanding of Buganda and Uganda that pays attention to gender balance. The novel’s revisionary tendency is also discussed by Ugandan literary scholar and critic Edgar Nabutanyi, who explores how patriarchal myths like the story of Kintu supported a heterosexual culture. He argues that by going back to Buganda’s foundational myth and pre-colonial history, Makumbi draws attention to Buganda’s and Uganda’s sexual practices as a way of tackling homophobia, which was rife in the country at the time of the novel’s publication (371). Nabutanyi’s argument implies that while the Kintu myth has been used to enforce a linear notion of gender and sexuality, there are stories from the past that suggest a more inclusive and tolerant Buganda.

#### **‘A Slave to Procreation and the Kingdom:’ Demystifying Kintu**

I have mentioned earlier that Makumbi’s revisiting of the androcentric Kintu myth is a deliberate revisionary act to re-present it from a feminist perspective. She takes two approaches to accomplish this: firstly, she demystifies the patriarchal elements of the myth and, secondly, foregrounds the unvoiced or elided women in the myth. The novel signals realism by drawing our attention to how the androcentric nature of the myth has influenced Buganda and Ugandan histories and the ways through which the Baganda see and interpret the world. As I shall explain, this sort of demystification implies that patriarchal mythology and its dominant interpretations are neither sacrosanct nor permanent and may be questioned and rewritten.

Due to the fluidity of oral traditions, the myth of Kintu has various versions, with some introducing figures and events that can be traced in Buganda’s history. The community has two Kintu figures whose stories remain influential to their social and political practices. On the one hand, is the primordial Kintu figure in the Kintu myth, and on the other, the Kintu legend who is credited with the establishment of the kingdom of Buganda. I provide examples of both below. Both the Kintu myth and the legend of Kintu are all rooted in Buganda’s oral traditions and have both been used (in some versions conflated) to reconstruct Buganda’s past. The

difference between the two can be revealed using Okpewho's arc in the previous chapter. The Kintu myth falls on Buganda's mythical time, while the Kintu legend falls on the historical time side of the arc.

In the novel, Kintu is a rigid designator linking different worlds; the mythological and the actual worlds. Makumbi imagines Kintu from a historical perspective to undermine the mythological Kintu, suggesting that some of the attributes that the myth accords him are human constructions meant to perpetuate patriarchal gender notions. Below is a summarised version of the Kintu myth as transcribed and translated by the Ugandan oral tradition scholar and feminist Helen Mugambi:

The story of the origin of the Baganda starts when, in the company of her two brothers Kayiikuuzi and Walumbe (Death), Nnambi, the daughter of Ggulu, king of the heavens, descends to earth to take a walk and meets the only man on earth, Kintu. Kintu is an extremely primitive being who, on being questioned by Nnambi, expresses ignorance of his origins; he has no concept of agriculture and keeps himself alive by eating cow dung and drinking cow urine. Nnambi assertively decides to marry Kintu and ascends back to heaven with him to ask her father's permission for their marriage. (By this action, she establishes herself as the prototype feminist Muganda woman). After passing a series of tests imposed by Ggulu, Kintu is allowed to marry Nnambi and return to earth. Ggulu instructs the two to leave right away so that they would avoid encountering Walumbe [death]. During the descent to earth, Nnambi discovers that she has forgotten to bring millet for her chicken. She disobeys her father and successfully persuades Kintu that they should return to heaven to retrieve the millet. As they start leaving heaven this time, Walumbe sees them and insists on descending to earth with them. Back on earth, Kintu and Nnambi beget children, the beginning of the Baganda ethnic group. Eventually, Walumbe starts killing the children. Ggulu then sends Kayiikuuzi, Nnambi's other brother, to capture Walumbe and return him to heaven. But Kayiikuuzi's efforts to capture Walumbe fail, and Kintu resigns himself to Walumbe's continued killing of the children. However, Kintu guarantees the continuation of the community by declaring that no matter how many of his children Walumbe would kill, he, Kintu, will always beget more. Up to this day, Baganda refer to themselves collectively as "Baana ba Kintu," children of Kintu. (Mugambi 52)



The notion of Kintu as the father and, therefore, the originator is a popular component of the Kintu myth. Nnambi, on the other hand, is known as a temptress who lured Kintu to the sky for marriage and then returned to earth with her twin brother, Walumbe (death) (Yoder 364). This interpretation of the myth ignores Nnambi's role of being the first to conceive the idea of a family with Kintu on earth where he had been lonely and dejected. Furthermore, it is her idea to nurture the seeds and plants on earth to sustain their descendants. John Yoder, a scholar on Buganda oral traditions and history, tells us that this version of the myth was informed by the arrival of Christianity in Buganda in the 1800s, where images of Kintu and Nnambi were realigned to those of biblical Adam and Eve. Eve is depicted as the originator of death and suffering on earth (364). A similar view of the Kintu myth is expressed by Juliana Nfa-Abbenyi, who argues that the "rigidifying gender relations" (Nfa-Abbenyi, *Gender* 23) in Buganda started with the arrival of missionaries and colonialists who embarked on replacing existing Buganda traditions with new structures that failed to assimilate Buganda's gender-integrated power relations. Nfa-Abbenyi here implies that even though there were already gender structures in Buganda before the arrival of missionaries and colonialists, there were important roles that Buganda women played, which the new colonial structures took away and replaced with Western patriarchal structures.

Therefore, the first instance of counterfactuality in the novel is the reinterpretation of the myth that relieves Nnambi of the burden as the originator of death in Buganda. The 'original sin' (death) that attracts a generational curse on Kintu's descendants in the text is committed by Kintu himself. Juxtaposed with the primordial myth where death is perceived to be a direct folly of Nnambi's, Kintu here commits an actual crime by taking another person's life. In contrast, Nnambi's only crime, according to the original myth, is to return to the sky to bring chicken feed against her father's instructions. This is also the act that makes her role in the myth famous. Makumbi demystifies the Kintu figure in the original myth by taking away his role as the revered originator of the Buganda nation and instead depicting him as the originator of a generational curse that afflicts a clan of his descendants for more than 250 years.

The approach to the Kintu myth that associates the patriarch with the origin of death is unpopular. However, it has been attempted by scholars such as historian Christopher Wrigley who describes him as the "first man of Ganda tradition who introduced sex and death to the middle-earth" (383). His assertion hinges on the belief that Buganda was originally a matrilineal society where the maternal uncles had as much claim on their sisters' children as their fathers. Therefore, Kintu refusing to give his brother-in-law, Walumbe (death), one of his

children, broke a social more that attracted a curse to his children (the Baganda). This reading of the Kintu myth is shared by another historian, Rhiannon Stephens, who stresses the importance of matrilineal kin networks to the Baganda that the myth further enshrined (219). Their interpretations imply that while the myth and the legend of Kintu do not give women any roles, Nnambi's decision to marry Kintu suggests a matrilineal kinship structure. Nevertheless, Wrigley and Stephens still associate Nnambi with death through her twin brother, with Kintu being a victim trying to protect his descendants from his wife's kin.

The image of the twins plays a powerful role in the novel in disrupting the foundational myth. While in the myth, Nnambi and Walumbe (death) are twins associated with the destruction of Kintu's lineage, Makumbi introduces a new image in the novel where twins are identical sisters who join hands in the act of creation. Makumbi demystifies the mythological Kintu by recasting him as a provincial governor in an eighteenth-century Buganda who appears burdened by the workings of patriarchy to sire as many children as possible as the 'father of the nation.' After his marriage to Nnakato, his first wife, they do not sire children as fast as society expects of a Buganda man in his position. The pressure to live up to these expectations forces the couple to find a solution, which lies with Nnakato's twin sister, Babirye, whom Kintu had initially refused to marry even though customs demanded that, in the case of twin sisters, the man should marry both. Babirye agrees to an arrangement that sees her deliver four sets of twins to the couple while she remains on the periphery until Kintu attempts to erase her contributions by appropriating all children as his, declaring that:

The children are mine: not yours, not hers. Mine.... When my children occupied her [Babirye's] body, it was temporary. I'll pay for her services if that is what she wants. Tell all the other wives who might want to cordon their children off with a "my" and "mine" attitude that I will take them away from them. (*Kintu* 18)

The statement above demonstrates Kintu's attempt to align himself with the figure of the mythical Kintu as the sole creator. For women, childbearing is depicted as a service to Kintu that they can be paid for if they choose to. Makumbi uses the character of Babirye to stop Kintu from these attempts to make his wives invisible. She sends her sister Nnakato to inform Kintu that "those children belong to Kintu because I said they do; if I change my mind they would not be his, would they?" (*Kintu* 19). Her threats force Kintu to marry her and subvert his masculine authority as the 'owner' of all the women and children in his household and figuratively undermines the mythological Kintu's position as the sole originator of Buganda.

Kintu's attempts reflect the practice in pre-colonial Buganda, where women were denied rights over their own children; after childbearing, a child's father assumed full ownership barring the mother from any rights over the child even though they remained in women's care (Stephens 220).

Furthermore, by thwarting Kintu's attempts at appropriating all children from his wives, Makumbi denies him the opportunity to align himself with the figure of the mythical Kintu, thereby subverting the gender binaries that ignored women as co-creators and co-originators of the Buganda nation. Kintu's powerlessness is further revealed in the scenes where he privately expresses his frustrations with the overwhelming patriarchal demands that he has to keep up with, firstly as a governor and secondly as a man. As the 'father of the nation', he is expected to have many wives, most of whom he is given, but which he sees as a duty:

[H]e felt bound. He was a prize bull thrown into a herd of heifers. He was Ppookino: why did he have to mount every woman thrown at him? On the other hand, how could he not? He was a man, a seed dispenser. It was natural: he should enjoy it.... Women given to him had to become his wives. In any case, Nnakato was an effective head-wife. She put in place a roster: every wife would have a child at least once in three years, ideally, once every two years...Nnakato brought the wives who failed to conceive to Mayirika [Kintu's official residence] and asked him to double his efforts. Kintu winced at the thought of the potions. They were enslaving...He was Ppookino, Kintu decided. He was a slave to procreation and to the kingdom. (17)

By portraying Kintu as an ordinary man lamenting being enslaved by the demands of Buganda customs, Makumbi puts him in direct contrast with the potent figure of Kintu in both the Kintu myth and the legend of Kintu. He represents the fact that even though patriarchy seems to benefit men more than women, men also share in its burden. Thus, in public, Kintu has to maintain the image of a governor to one of fictional Buganda's powerful provinces with the added prestige as the father of four sets of twins. However, he secretly suffers and laments about "the snare of being a man. Society heaped such expectations on manhood that in a bid to live up to them some men snapped" (24). The idea that, in this case, Kintu's sexuality is controlled by the women is Makumbi's way of undermining the myth of masculine virility that is perpetuated by the original Kintu story. The 'roster', in particular, reduces Kintu's relation to women from sexual conquest to a burdening duty.

## **‘Spoilt Brides and Wrathful Princesses:’ Narrating Buganda Women in Myth and History**

From the interpretations of the Kintu myth in the previous section by Wrigley and Stephens, Nnambi is known for her domestic duties and her relations to men, as Ggulu’s daughter, Walumbe’s (death’s) twin sister, and Kintu’s wife. Ugandan historian Nakanyike Musisi traces female inferiority in Buganda to the Kintu myth, which she argues was the origin of women’s domesticity in Buganda. She explains that by Nnambi joining Kintu on earth to start what would later become the Buganda kingdom, she gave herself to a life of hard labour and subservience, giving up in the process, the freedom and autonomy she had enjoyed in the sky in her father’s house (767). Musisi emphasises the fact that Nnambi’s marriage to Kintu was an act of sympathy to a man who only had a cow as a friend and lacked the imagination and creativity to make the ground produce other foods for his own survival.

Ugandan feminist scholars have argued that the elision and misrepresentation of women in the Kintu myth begin in her father’s (Ggulu’s) household. The only woman mentioned is Nnambi and there is no mother figure. Mugambi reads two overpowering paradigms here: “silencing of the female voice and the actual deletion, or erasure of the female presence and power”, which have perpetrated a patriarchal societal structure (52). She suggests that the silencing and deletion of female figures informed the present gender conceptualisations in Buganda and, to an extent, Uganda, owing to the myth’s popularity across Uganda. In Makumbi’s latest novel, *The First Woman* (2020), which seems to be in a direct conversation with *Kintu*, she continues with her engagement in reworking the Kintu myth further by introducing a mother figure to Ggulu’s household as the excerpt below shows:

‘She did not have a mother, only a father and brothers’ ‘See? They had found a hole in their first story of Kintu ne Nnambi and now filled it. Nnambi got a mother. A woman who, apparently, rose from the sea. Her name was Nnamazzi. In fact, Nnamazzi was said to have brought all water bodies on land’.... ‘Because this story was buried’.... ‘Apparently, Nnamazzi was so magnificent that when Gulu saw her, he was mesmerised. She gave him a lot of sons, including Walumbe, the bringer of death, and Kayikuuzi, the burrower, but only one daughter, Nnambi. Then one day, after years and years of being together, Nnamazzi, without provocation, without explanation, got up and went back to the sea. She never came back. Gulu was so heartbroken, he never remarried. He brought up his children on his own. So, if the first woman came from the sea

and returned to it, women belonged there'...she is a story. A story which aggravated our situation. They used her to link our original state to the sea. You do not realise, but ancients had such an irrational fear of the nature of women that they would try anything to keep them under control. They supported this story by pointing to the sea. Apparently, both women and the sea were baffling, changeful: today they are this, tomorrow they are that.' (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 59)

The above excerpt depicts counterfactual mythmaking because Makumbi introduces a figure not initially in the Kintu myth. She uses Nnamazzi to draw the reader's attention to how making the Buganda creation myth was a patriarchal process driven by men's fear for women's power. The excerpt implies that various versions of the Kintu myth were introduced as the society continued to change, with every change aimed at finding new ways of depicting women as the originators of misfortunes. Makumbi's introduction of Nnamazzi addresses the silencing and deletion of the mother figure that Mugambi highlights above by drawing our attention to how the making and the remaking of the Kintu myth serve specific patriarchal narratives and interests.

Mugambi's views are echoed by another Ugandan feminist scholar, Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza, who avers that the origin of gender binaries in Buganda is associated with the time of Kintu (the king). She notes that before then, there was no dominant or subservient gender status and that a person's role in society was determined by their ability to perform specific duties. Therefore, the establishment of Buganda as a political institution came with a new kind of gender stratification in which women were further relegated to the periphery (369). Her sentiments speak to how gender stereotypes, especially those that throw women to the peripheries of societal structures, are "defined by a particular social and historical context" (Rousselot 133). Such myths of female inferiority are then carried from one context to the next, which explains the influence of both the Kintu myth and the legend of Kintu. The Ugandan scholar, Immaculate Kizza, posits that Kintu, credited with establishing the Buganda kingdom, possibly changed his name from Kato to Kintu and his wife's Nantuttululu to Nnambi to align with those of Buganda's mythological ancestors (22). Below is a summarised version of the Kintu legend as transcribed and translated by Kizza:

Once upon a time there were two brothers, *Bemba* and *Kintu*, both in line for the leadership of the Baganda (some sources say that they actually might have been twins). When their father was dying, he willed the throne to *Kintu*, which

did not make *Bemba* happy. After the death of their father, there developed a rivalry for the throne between *Kintu* and *Bemba* despite their father's will, and it is said that this rivalry was fuelled by their other siblings, who also wanted the same throne. One day *Kintu* got into a very bad disagreement with his brother *Bemba*, and it ended with *Kintu* being overthrown and sent into exile by his brother... [Kintu] then returned to battle *Bemba* when he had accumulated substantial resources to aid him in that mission... *Kintu* invaded *Bemba* and succeeded in killing him. After defeating *Bemba*, *Kintu* consolidated his power...and declared himself leader of...the Baganda people...[and] convened probably the first known constitutional conference in Buganda, [which] discussed and formulated the kingdom's first and only "constitution," which has been in operation since that time although it was not put on paper at the time. (Kizza 22)

The merger of the myth and legend presents a single figure of Kintu as the mythical father of Buganda and the founder of the Buganda kingdom described above. American political scientist and historian John Yoder, who has researched the influence of Buganda mythology on the kingdom's political institutions, explains that the merger could have occurred around the 1800s when Buganda leaders used the community's myths, legends, and history as political tools for peace-making between Buganda clans as well as for propaganda. He argues that Buganda's Kabakas (kings) around this time presented themselves as heroes who shouldered the prosperity of the kingdom. They were unquestionable, just like the mythical Kintu, and thus inspired fear and commanded obedience across the kingdom (363). The versions of the Kintu legend, including the one by Kizza above, are silent on women's positions during the establishment of the kingdom. In fact, the legend of Kintu above does not mention women. The narrative that comes from the merger between the two Kintu stories is one "controlling text" (Mugambi 46) based on their stereotypical representation of women, which has defined gender norms in Buganda and Uganda.

In a note to his translation of Sir Apollo Kagwa's *Bassekabaka Ba Buganda (The Kings of Buganda)*, Semakula Kiwanuka, a scholar of Buganda oral traditions, provides a necessary clarification on the Kintu myth and the legend of Kintu: "when dealing with traditional history, one must determine where mythology ends and where history begins. In the case of Buganda, history begins with the second version of the story of Kintu" (Kiwanuka 2). The second version that Kiwanuka refers to is similar to the version presented by Kizza above because of the

verifiable historical material it contains. However, Kiwanuka's assertions reveal his subordination of myth to history even though the two continue to pervade one another with the introduction of new images and figures.

Storytelling is central in this process because it involves manipulating images and figures and introducing a fancifulness based on the immediate needs of the storyteller. For instance, in the case of the Kintu myth, it can be construed that the deletion of women figures could have been done by male narrators who have been socialised to believe that it is their responsibility to narrate the story of their nation's formation. Okpewho recalls that most of his narrators when collecting oral stories were men because women, on the one hand, were mainly accustomed to telling aetiological tales involving animals and humans meant to inculcate good behaviour in the society. They were withdrawn from telling their societies' stories of conquest because they were not involved in wars, a perceived masculine space. On the other hand, men were always ready to narrate such stories because they considered it their job (Okpewho, "Oral Tradition" 217). This could have been because society expected women to perform domestic duties while men were to serve the community through military service. Such domestic duties were not considered part of serving the community. Even though Okpewho's method of selecting his narrators cannot be deemed exhaustive, it could explain why the second version of the Kintu story above is all about men's fight for the throne and the eventual establishment of order and political institution of Buganda without the mention of women.

Setting the novel in a historical context allows Makumbi to tackle the making invisible of women in both the myth and the historical past. Besides Kintu's twin wives who refuse to let him appropriate their children, as I have discussed in the previous section, Makumbi also brings to the fore strong female figures perceived as controversial who reflect women's political participation in pre-colonial Buganda. Women are portrayed as critical decision-makers in the leadership structure of the kingdom and as the determinants of who becomes the king. Those with sons are more enviable among the Buganda royals in the textual actual world because of their influence on the throne. This depiction reflects the actual world Buganda where motherhood was influential in organising social and political relationships during the pre-colonial period despite fatherhood being central even among the Buganda commoners (Stephens 220). In the novel, however, this influence also works to the benefit of men because as soon as one of the queen mother's sons sits on the throne, she has no other role except grooming the next son in case the sitting king displays a loose grasp of his powers. Furthermore, to ensure they secure their positions as queen mothers, they choose brides for their sons,

preferring only women who would not outwit them in the running of the kingdom. They thus run the kingdom through their sons, who seem to be only political figureheads of the institution. Besides the queen mothers in the novel, the princesses equally play central roles in the leadership of the kingdom. Princess Nnasolo, for instance, who is described as a “wrathful princess”, saves her brother’s children after he is killed in a coup by their other brother. She goes into exile and nurtures the boys in readiness for the throne. After a few years, she returns “rumbling with rage” and puts her brother, the king, to the sword, after which she installs one of her nephews to the throne (*Kintu* 6). Princess Nnasolo’s courage to participate in a violent coup against her brother offers a model of women engaged in military action and intervening in the formation of the kingdom. The scene represents the battle that pits a perceived powerless princess against an influential patriarchal figure, with the former coming out victorious. The portrayal of Princess Nnasolo thus subverts the normative conceptualisation of womanhood in Buganda culture drawn from the androcentric Kintu myth and the legend of Kintu, which both glorify ferocity and brute strength as attributes of male warriors (Mugambi 52).

Like Princess Nnasolo, the other figure in the eighteenth-century section of the novel who subverts the image of Nnambi is Princess Mazzi, who is presented as scandalous but free, qualities which are liberating to her as she only lasts three days in marriage after discovering what patriarchy expects of her as a wife. Mazzi leaves her marriage and chooses not to leave one form of domesticity to another by returning to her parents’ home, taking the time to tour the kingdom for fun. By rejecting Buganda’s traditional expectations of women to be silent about their ideas while being loyal and supportive to their husbands in line with the mythological figure of Nnambi, she is described as “notorious the world over” and “a metaphor for spoilt brides” (*Kintu* 67). Makumbi uses her as a symbol of self-liberation for not waiting to be saved and self-confidence for taking actions she knows will be deemed controversial in the eyes of society.

By introducing a character such as Mazzi, Makumbi is returning to historical research on the role of princesses to disrupt the gender roles that are sedimented in the myth and which are presented as originary cultural facts. Based on gender constructions in pre-colonial Buganda, the princesses were given a masculine status in some cases. For instance, they could choose whom to marry and leave such marriages at will; in fact, it was taboo for men to approach them with marriage proposals (Musisi 774; Nnanyonga-Tamussuza 34). These imply that besides biology, traditional gender constructions among the Baganda were also informed by socio-cultural factors. A person’s position in society and where they were born determined their



gender. Nannyonga-Tamusuza further clarifies that the royals such as the princesses could be addressed “as ‘Ssebo’ (sir), a title designated for men of high status” (34). Moreover, in some cases, as the character of Nnasolo demonstrates, the princesses took up more roles traditionally reserved for men, like engaging in wars (34). However, it is evident that these titles also signal that respect for women was conceptualised in masculine terms. Nevertheless, the royal household was not strictly bound by the gender constructions enshrined in the Kintu myth and offered some space for women to affirm themselves.

Like princesses Nnasolo and Mazzi in the first section of the novel, Kusi, a descendant of Kintu in the textual world, is a modern-day soldier in the Ugandan military forces. She joins the liberation struggle for a new Uganda as a rebel and chooses to remain in the army after the war has ended (*Kintu* 364). Her father, Miisi, portrayed as a neo-traditionalist, feels that the army is misusing Kusi because of the leading roles she plays. His comment that “...as if there are no men in the army” (*Kintu* 366) implies two positions in relation to traditional expectations: first, it resonates with the masculinist notion that war is not a place for women and secondly, that women in the army are indeed treated differently from their male counterparts and assigned more roles than they can handle. Kusi’s busy schedule that leaves her with little time to visit her family attests that she is overworked and socially isolated. Nevertheless, Kusi’s role in defending and helping stabilise the nation aligns with Princess Nnasolo. Both discharge the powers to destroy life on behalf of the society, thereby subverting what the late Kenyan political scientist, Ali Mazrui, has called “benevolent sexism” (100)—the belief that only men have the power to defend the society as women stay at home for their own protection.

Through Kusi, the novel also reflects Mazrui’s idea of female empowerment in African politics and leadership. He suggests that there is a need to allow more women into African military forces to demilitarise African politics and support women’s leadership (100). Mazrui’s position is supported by Winnie Byanyima, a Ugandan feminist and a former soldier who emphasises that: “Ugandan women were not invited to the resistance war, they forced their way in because the issues of human rights, democracy, nationalisation, were close to their hearts” (142). For them, it was a moral obligation to join the liberation struggle without seeking approval from anyone. However, besides missing out on political positions after the wars, they were not adequately represented in nationalist histories. Helen Mugambi also notes that women ventured into a perceived male terrain, the guerrilla war that brought Yoweri Museveni to power, and had hoped they were well-positioned in the country’s new leadership dispensation. She likens the invisibility of women who joined Museveni’s National Resistance Movement and fought

with their babies strapped to their backs to Nnambi's treatment in the Kintu myth. Like Nnambi, who has to run away from Walumbe (death) to settle and bear children with Kintu on earth, these women inspired the struggle for a new nation. However, their contributions later went unrewarded and unrecognised (59).

The 'homecoming' section and the rituals Kintu descendants perform signal a sense of return to roots and offer the descendants a moment of retrospection about the aspects of the myth of Kintu that do not serve them. Here, the myth is not the original Kintu myth but constructed by Kintu's descendants in the textual actual world. The event is held in a forest, named by the locals as 'Nnakato's forest' in reference to Kintu's first wife who committed suicide there. The locals around the forest mythologise her and hold beliefs that she roams the forest in the form of a leopard and "can look after herself" (*Kintu* 373) and protects the forest against intruders. Kintu's descendants, by choosing to construct a community shrine in this forest where the spirits of Nnakato roam freely, therefore, challenge the image of Kintu as the father of the textual world Buganda nation. This is further illustrated by the descendants' descriptions of Kintu as the "husband of Nnakato" while Nnakato gets the tag of a "powerful matriarch" (316). In the section of the story set in the eighteenth century, whereas Kintu is a powerful governor, Nnakato is only famous as his 'favourite wife.' Therefore, their depiction in the 'homecoming' section of the novel elevates Nnakato to mythical proportions and is thus a deliberate moment in undermining the actual world of Buganda's Kintu myth.

Another way the 'homecoming' section revises the traditions of both the textual and actual world Buganda is the choice of elders to lead the 'homecoming.' Miisi is a Cambridge-educated professor who is picked by the spirits of the Kintu clan to lead the cleansing of the clan. He is assisted by a medium conveniently named Muganda (a person of Buganda origin), also educated in Cambridge. Even though they are all males, they make decisions that unsettle the gender relations in the Kintu clan. They seek new ways of understanding and interpreting myths and traditions to allow every clan member to participate in its activities. Miisi, for instance, goes against the traditions that bar women from inheriting their father's property by appointing his daughter, Kusi, as his heir. He declares that "I am the first Ganda man to elect a daughter for an heir. Put that down in history" (*Kintu* 439). He then threatens to use his position as the clan's new leader to summon the Kintu curse on anyone who tries going against his will. While Miisi could be making these decisions consciously out of his objective outlook at the Buganda traditions, there is also credible reasons to believe that the prevailing circumstances compel him. First, he only appoints Kusi as his heir because all his sons have died, and he verbalises

this: “my sons had to die so I could see!” (*Kintu* 439). Secondly, Miisi is portrayed as having a troubled mind. His ambivalence and the visits by the spirits leave him unsure of what to believe. Taken at the mythical level, however, given that he is the chosen leader and the vessel of the spirits of the fictional Kintu clan, his declaration can be considered to mean that the ‘homecoming’ not only connects the descendants to their 250-year-old past but also promises a new direction in terms of gender relations. The above circumstances thus suggest that the mythical curse of the clan enforces gender collaborations among the members of the Kintu clan.

### **Temporality and the Counterfactual Telling of Myth**

In the process of narration, time and space play a crucial role in establishing whether a story is mythological or historical. This is explained by Okpewho’s arc in the previous chapter. Makumbi utilises the time-space continuum to delve into the mythical world while simultaneously signalling reality in the past and contemporary Uganda’s actual world. The reader is able to juxtapose events in 1750 Buganda with those of 2004 and reflect on how the 250-year gap affects a historical account; the wider the gap, the less factual a story becomes. This is explained by Okpewho’s continuum in the previous chapter, with historical time (fact) on the one side and mythical time (fiction) on the other. He argues that every story can move either way between these temporalities depending on the author’s or storyteller’s deliberate decisions to introduce or leave out some images and figures as they attempt to balance the factual and the mythical (68). In other words, a historical (factual) event can be narrated repeatedly, with narrators introducing different distortions that erode such stories’ historicity.

Time and space are essential counterfactual elements. In examining events in a textual actual world, narratologist Gerrard Genette argues that narrative time allows us to evaluate the narrator’s temporal position in respect to the story’s setting. A temporal position determines how the narrator tells a story; reveals what she can say, remembers, imagines and even participated in (35). The organisation of a narrative and how these events are joined to achieve unity in the narrative are therefore the workings of temporality.

*Kintu* is a multi-plot narrative that undercuts Buganda myth and history, the two master narratives that have silenced women’s voices. The text’s six books are capable of standing on their own. Makumbi enhances coherence by beginning each section with specific times and locations where the events are taking place. The prologue is set on the fifth of January 2004 in a modern-day Kampala market where Kamu Kintu is killed. The event is significant in the entire narrative because it acts as an interlude that intersperses the major sections of the

narrative. Every ‘book’ is introduced with a story of Kamu’s death except ‘book VI’, the homecoming section where his killers are tracked down and possibly murdered by his sister, Kusi, in revenge.

The introduction of the major sections of the narrative with Kamu’s story on the fifth of January 2004 deliberately makes the date the reference point as the narrative traces the origin of the Kintu curse and its effects on Kintu’s descendants. After the prologue, the narrator takes us back to “Buddu Province, Buganda: The Moon of *Gatonya*, 1750” (*Kintu* 3 emphasis in original), where Kintu Kidida is introduced living an ordinary life. The introduction of Kintu in a specific place and time suggests that the Kintu figure here is part of a historical context rigidly designated. This undermines the original Kintu myth, set in a distant past and always beginning with the timeless opening of ‘once upon a time...’ The setting allows the narrative to dramatise the origin of the curse to explain how Kamu finds himself unlucky in Kampala’s streets. This implies that while the Kintu descendants suffer different afflictions, they also hold a mythical belief that Kintu protects them. Nevertheless, the reader can spot inconsistencies in the stories by Kintu’s descendants as they mythologise and give his figure an extraordinary prominence through subsequent storytelling sessions in fictional contemporary Uganda.

In each of the subsequent sections, Kamu’s story strategically coincides with what other Kintu descendants are going through, which all point to the curse. In the second section, while Kamu’s body has been lying at Mulago hospital unidentified, Suubi Nankintu is introduced as recalling her grandmother’s stories of Kintu. This is the first time the reader is introduced to a mythologised story of Kintu Kidida in the eighteenth-century section of the text. The version of the story in Suubi’s mind, which is italicised to distinguish it from the rest of the story visually, glorifies Kintu and the past male Buganda kings and does not mention any of the women who feature in the first section of the text. For instance, Suubi drops her traditional name, Nnakato, which is reserved for female twins, and instead adopts Nankintu, the feminine version of the name Kintu. She claims that such names are now used beyond the clan. However, as she tries to belong to a multicultural Uganda, she inadvertently elevates Kintu while suppressing Nnakato, and this act dramatises the elision of women and the elevation of male ancestors from the myth (West-Pavlov 78).

Furthermore, the image of Kintu from Suubi’s memories is a flawless ancestor and a protector of his descendants: “Ntwire thought that by trapping him on earth, Kintu would miss being a spirit—you know, not worshipped or offered sacrifices? But because Kintu is still roaming the world, he is able to see Ntwire’s wrath coming, and often he protects his children” (*Kintu* 101).

This distortion can be attributed to the storyteller's—Suubi's grandmother's—desire to entertain the audience by adding or ignoring some aspects of the story each time it is presented (Okpewho, *Myth* 82).

However, Suubi has an unreliable memory and is haunted by the spirits of her dead twin sister, whom she does not remember. The only part of her childhood she remembers is her grandmother's stories. It means that the Kintu story from the first section of the text possibly suffers double distortion, first through her grandmother's additions and deletions and second through her unreliable memories. The only aspects of the Kintu story that survive these distortions are unsurprisingly those that mention his exploits and other male leaders of the fictional Buganda clan. Here, Makumbi draws our attention to the instability of myths as a narrative form.

By depicting Suubi's memories and personal afflictions as happening around the same time Kamu is lying in the mortuary, Makumbi gives credence to the Kintu curse from the first section of the text. For its role in introducing and linking the Kintu curse to his descendants, the story of Kamu's sudden and unfortunate death bears what narratologist Seymour Chatman refers to as the “temporal centre of gravity” (356). It is driven by aspects of temporality such as analepsis and prolepsis to play a counterfactual role. Besides creating a unified narrative out of the fragments of stories from Kintu's descendants, it fills in the gaps that may arise as the narrative oscillates between eighteenth-century Buganda and twenty-first-century Uganda. Most importantly, the back-and-forth narration in the text suggests the process of turning history into myth and myth into history, as Okpewho's arc demonstrates. In other words, it suggests that myths may not necessarily be fanciful stories set in unknown and unverifiable pasts but can also be part of a people's lived realities at one point. Similarly, mythical figures can be introduced into historical narratives as a way of the narrators achieving specific goals. Therefore, storytellers and historians continuously reconstruct both myth and history to reflect current realities where new images are introduced.

*Kintu* adopts a cyclic structure that bridges the gap between received western novelistic forms and African oral storytelling sessions. The cyclic nature of time in myths relies on the belief that what had existed in the past is always present or will return. Edward Sackey links the recurrence of time in African storytelling to spirits, adding that the “preservation of the cyclic continuity of time is important to the survival of the community as a whole” (395). These are the continued narrations of the past, primarily through myths where beliefs and practices around life and death can freely be expressed. *Kintu*'s cyclical pattern strengthens the plot

through the belief among the members of the fictional Kintu clan that the spirits of their ancestors are always watching them. Makumbi thus creates a third space where neo-traditionalists such as Miisi and Muganda are chosen by the spirits of the clan to lead the ‘homecoming.’

Transculturality is also depicted by Suubi, who is ambivalent about the traditions of Buganda but is forced to attend the homecoming because she wants to get rid of her dead twin sister’s spirits. It, however, turns out that even the rituals at the homecoming cannot alleviate her afflictions. She has to undergo further exorcism where her sister’s spirits are cast into a wooden necklace which she has to wear all her life. Makumbi thus uses characters such as Suubi, Miisi, and Muganda to suggest that there are aspects of Buganda traditions that cannot be easily discarded, and any reworking must recognise their importance in Buganda’s social life. The narrator lets us into Miisi’s mind and his dreams, where the plans for the homecoming are revealed to him despite his ambivalence to the traditions. According to narratologists Lucie Guillemette and Cynthia Levesque, *analepsis* builds a character’s psyche through describing images, events, and people from their history (255). In the case of Miisi, his troubled mind is a result of the coincidence between the content of his dreams and the fact that elders from his clan also visit him with similar information about their family history. While he sees what has been mythologised as the ‘Kintu curse’ as a generational mental disorder, which he tries to solve from an academic angle, his dreams increasingly put him in an ambivalent position. He is taken on a tour of the eighteenth-century Buganda and instructed on leading the clan in ‘homecoming’ by a man covered in bees. He is shown the sites where the bodies of Kintu, his wife, Nnakato, and their adopted son, Kalema, lie.

Myths create and reinforce gender stereotypes. The Kintu myth that inspired Makumbi’s *Kintu* has been reproduced to suit various contexts where the myth’s notions of gender have been replicated. A counterfactual analysis of the novel shows a reworking of the myth that desacralises it, revealing what seems to be a matriarchal power structure in the actual world of pre-colonial Buganda. The nature of leadership is double layered; these women figures appear powerful and provide a balance of political power but at the same time are sometimes pawns in patriarchal political schemes. Makumbi’s depiction of these women suggests that even though the Kintu myth has significant influence in structuring the kingdom, the history of women in Buganda is complex, contrary to what the masculine narratives have always presented. *Kintu*, therefore, is an invitation to “tell this story properly. There is another woman in the story” (Makumbi, *Manchester* 259).

### Mythopoesis in *Homegoing*

Literary scholar Estella Lauter has argued that women writers remake myths and rebel against the alienation of women in society by creating new myths that honour and validate women's experiences (1). As my discussion in the previous sections of this chapter has shown, Makumbi does this more straightforwardly in *Kintu* because she expressly sets out to create a story that undermines the Buganda myth of origin. In *Homegoing*, Gyasi sets out to retell the history of slavery in Ghana by creating a new myth that foregrounds women's experiences of slavery. While the text makes references to certain aspects of Akan mythologies and cultural practices, Gyasi's engagement with established mythic material is not as straightforward as Makumbi's.

In this section of the chapter, I discuss two ways in which counterfactuals and mythopoesis work in the text. I begin by drawing attention to how Gyasi attempts to engage existing Akan mythologies through images and figures common in Akan cultures—the Akan community brings together the Asante, Fante, and other smaller ethnic groups. In the first section, I juxtapose Gyasi's characterisation of Maame with the Akan supreme deity, Nyame. I attempt to explore the similarities and coincidences of the primordial mother figure in the text and propose that Maame is depicted as a violated mother-goddess—Nyame. In the second section, I discuss how Gyasi utilises the alternate worlds of dreams to create a myth that draws our attention to the long-lasting effects of the violence of slavery and colonialism.

*Homegoing* is a critically acclaimed debut novel by the Ghanaian-born writer Yaa Gyasi. The novel was published in 2016, and Gyasi has since published *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020), which focuses on the lives of a Ghanaian family living in Alabama. Like *Kintu*, *Homegoing* is a multigenerational saga, beginning in the eighteenth-century Gold Coast (now Ghana), and traces the lives of two sisters, Effia and Esi, born in separate Akan clans. Effia is born in Fante, a slave-trading nation, while Esi is born in Asante, a warrior nation that specialises in capturing slaves. Maame, the mother of the two, is a slave to a Fante 'big man', Cobbe Otcher, who rapes her and sends her away on the night she gives birth to Effia. She moves to Asante, where she starts a new life as the wife to another 'big man', Asare, and gives birth to Esi.

The novel is structured into two main plots, with one tracing the lives of Effia's descendants, first in Ghana and later in the United States, while the second plot traces the lives of Esi's descendants mainly in the United States. The text is thus an ambitious neo-slave narrative in terms of the scope of the historical period and the geographical locations of the actual world it attempts to represent. Through the experiences of every descendant of the two women, the text

covers aspects of the history of both Ghana and the United States, ranging from how the Asante-Fante tribal wars fanned the eighteenth-century slave trade to twenty-first-century America, where the last descendants of the two women meet and plan a ‘homegoing’ to Ghana even though they are not aware of their common ancestry.

*Homegoing* charts a path in narrating slavery that until its publication was underexplored. Stories that account for personal experiences of survivors of slavery from Africa are still few, whether autobiographical or fictional. Even fewer are slave narratives that reimagine women’s experiences during and after slavery. The difference between *Homegoing* and some of the popular slave narratives such as Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) is that while the two texts trace the African roots of their subjects through male genealogies, *Homegoing* traces the matrilineal lineage. This is particularly notable given that the two women, Effia and Esi, are born to Maame but have different fathers, all described as ‘big men’—slave owners and traders with massive influence. By setting aside their powerful backgrounds and telling the story from Maame’s side, Gyasi signals the first instance of counterfactually telling a slave narrative. Exploring the female descendancy in the text is a different way of understanding the impact of slavery in Africa and addresses sexual violence, which was slavery’s most common tool of operation (Ze Winters 344; Motahane et al. 24).

Furthermore, focusing on Maame allows Gyasi to explore how Akan women related to the slave trade in the eighteenth century. It exposes the complicity that they owned slaves themselves even though they were violated. This complicity is depicted by how Maame, a former slave, is forced to choose a slave from the group of Fante slaves captured by her husband. Abronoma, the girl she picks, turns out to know the story of her slavery in Fante, and which Esi wants to know. Abronoma exploits Esi’s curiosity about her mother’s past life in Fante and offers to tell her the story. In return, Esi has to send a message to her father, another ‘big man’, to let him know where she is. The arrival of Abronoma’s father ends her slavery in Maame’s household and marks the beginning of Esi’s journey into slavery. In an interview with *NPR*, Gyasi reveals that one of the themes she wanted to cover in the text was the complicity of Ghanaians during the Transatlantic slave trades (para.7).

*Homegoing*, albeit a work of fiction, covers the interaction between the Fante and the Asante, the two antagonistic Akan ethnic groups whose roles have not been fully explored by Ghanaian historiography as historian Rebecca Shumway observes (8). The text reflects the ordinary lives



of a majority of people who were not involved in the major historical decisions, such as the rise of the Asante kingdom or the coalition of the Akan ethnic groups in the eighteenth century. The commoners were often victims of these decisions; at some point used to help capture slaves, while at other times, the slave captors were sold alongside the slaves they had brought in (Shumway 7). This is an aspect of the slave trade that Eric Hahonou and Lotte Pelckmans have argued has not been given much attention in slave narratives from Africa and is often silenced and even treated as a taboo despite its equally devastating effects (91). This silence is captured in historian Raymond Dummett's study of Akan. He explores their pre-colonial lifestyles in small chiefdoms in the forest and how the "Atlantic overseas trade" with Europe improved the region's economy and social life (31).

Gyasi's exploration of the experiences of slavery in both Ghana and the United States does not suggest the universality of the two experiences. However, it fictionally depicts how the two morphed into each other. Her reimagination of the violence, dispossession and long-lasting impacts of slavery through mythical lenses, reinforces her focus to counterfactually, retelling this specific aspect of history in a way that demonstrates a balanced representation.

### **Maame as a Violated Mother-Goddess**

As the foregoing discussion has shown, *Homegoing's* primary setting is the eighteenth-century Gold Coast among the Akan people. According to Dummett, the Akan made up nearly sixty per cent of Ghana's population as of 2005 (31). While Dummett argues that it is not known when the Akan clans came together as a unit, another historian Sackey suggests that the Akan was initially a single ethnic group, which disintegrated due to disagreements between the Fante and the Asante before coming back together in the eighteenth century to form an alliance against European colonial intentions (396). This explains why the Akan do not have one unified oral tradition. However, the individual clans share certain cultural beliefs and practices, such as language, Twi, and the worship of Nyame (Onyame), the supreme being who lives in the sky (Dummett 31).

The Akan cosmologies portray Nyame as an all-knowing deity who owns the sky and the earth. While some versions portray Nyame as male, scholars have argued that Nyame is a supreme mother-goddess capable of separating herself into male and female (Meyerowitz 23, Danquah 361, Goody 68). In one of the abbreviated versions of one of the popular Akan myths explaining the origin of the universe, Eva Meyerowitz notes that the female aspect of Nyame's body was believed to be a fire (combining the moon and the sun) while the male aspect was "the spirit"

(24). Joseph Danquah explains that Nyame separated herself into two aspects: “latent male and female or ‘fire and water’, [which] are the basic foundation[s] of the universe” (361). Danquah, whose version greatly influenced Meyerowitz’s, seems to associate water with the spiritual, implying that Nyame, the mother-goddess, is a combination of fire and water in one mystical body.

I draw attention to Nyame to explore Gyasi’s characterisation of Maame as the primordial mother figure in the text. I am cognizant of the trouble with this interpretation given that Maame is a common term among the Akan, first as a word that translates to ‘Mother’ and secondly as a popular name for girls. Gyasi’s decision, therefore, could be reflective of these two common uses. However, a reading of writings on Akan religions and cosmologies by scholars such as Meyerowitz, Danquah, and Goody above suggests that the term Maame could have been linguistically adapted from Nyame—the mother-goddess. These works also reveal similarities between Gyasi’s characterisation of Maame with the supreme deity, suggesting a deliberate intellectual decision to recast the mother-goddess into a historical context where her experiences are used to retell slavery and colonialism.

Fire and water imageries run throughout the novel. The novel opens with a description of a raging fire that also describes Maame’s escape from Cobbe Otcher’s compound, which characterises her as the fire:

The night Effia Otcher was born into the musky heat of the Fanteland, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father’s compound. It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. (3)

Her movement into the night is described in a mythical language, which envisages her as the moving fire from the Fante to Asante where she settles. Specific words from the above excerpt such as ‘lived’, ‘slept’, and ‘unconcerned’ are animate qualities that are attributed to fire, an inanimate object, thereby drawing our attention to Maame’s association with it. With the above passage in mind, the reader anticipates the woman who appears in Akua’s dreams in the shape of fire later in the text (I discuss this in the next section).

The above passage introduces fire as symbolising the violent separation of Maame and her daughter Effia, who is then described as a child of fire. It also invokes the image of Nyame in her male aspect envisaged as fire (Meyerowitz 23). Nyame is believed to be animated by a *kra*

(soul) to give life to the universe and gifts women with the power to bear life and defend it (Akyeampong and Obeng 492). The fact that Maame as a primordial mother bears life but cannot stop Cobbe Otcher from taking away her child suggests that, unlike Nyame, who is powerful and all-knowing, Maame is a victim of slavery with limited power. It also implies slavery's destruction of Akan's core of the family. Her depiction as a fire destroying crops and trees can be interpreted as a violated mother-goddess expressing her rage.

Effia's line of Maame's family is therefore associated with the image of fire, while Esi's line is associated with water. Danquah's equation of water to spirits in Akan mythology speaks to its vastness, a world of the unknown that inspires both hope and fear, connection and loss, and life and death. Water in slave narratives carries similar meanings, symbolising the specific meanings of the brutality of journeys across the Atlantic Ocean and a hope for freedom. One of the earliest slave narratives where this contrasting imagery has been captured is Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), in which he narrates how some of his compatriots, while aboard a slave ship, preferred to jump into the sea instead of becoming slaves (28).

The imageries of fire and water signify the various forms of violence that Maame and her descendants go through under slavery, and which results in them experiencing traumatic memories. While fire and water depict the separateness of the two sisters, their connectedness is depicted by the two stone pendants, the only pieces of memory that Maame leaves to each of the women. Coincidentally, the Akan Mother-goddess, Nyame's shrine had a stone axe, which historians Emmanuel Akyeampong and Peshington Obeng have argued carried the community's memory as an agrarian society (486). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the idea of 'homegoing' in the text is an attempt to restore and cope with the loss of the family core of Maame's descendants that was shattered by slavery. Her descendants, Marjorie and Marcus, who have fears of fire and water, respectively, face these fears and meet at the Cape Coast, where Marjorie hands the only remaining stone pendant to Marcus as a way of welcoming him home.

### **Dreams as Alternate Histories**

In this section of the chapter, I discuss how dreams reproduce an alternative history of slavery where Maame, the slave girl whose story is erased at the beginning of the text, appears to one of her descendants in dreams and nightmares where she retells the story of her lineage. Mythmaking in the text appears to be more straightforward in these dreams. Dreams are

counterfactual in the sense that they create an alternate possible world that violates the rules of the reality of the actual world and the textual actual world. There are two approaches to analysing the counterfactuality in dreams and how they potentially mythologise real events. The psychoanalytic approach posits that dreams activate and process counterfactuals: “they are mental simulations or analogue models of alternative outcomes of what actually occurred. These analogue-modelling strategies may be the source of much pictorial feel of visual nature of dream content” (McNamara 238). This occurs when the imageries created in the mind of the dreamer are drawn from events that occurred in the past or are occurring presently to them. In this regard, the dreams replay reality while at the same time generating counterfactual alternatives of how the events could have turned out. These alternatives, Patrick McNamara argues, are responsible for the bizarreness or the unusual imageries in some dreams (241).

The second approach considers the place of dreams in narrative theory. Narratologist Richard Walsh explores dreams’ complex and ambiguous status in narratology and avers that dreams can be fictional or mere hallucinations but are nevertheless narrative representations. He argues that “experiencing a dream...is experiencing a narrative process: a reciprocal process of creation and reception” (142). The implied reciprocity in this process has to do with the fact that the dreamer can be considered both a creator and a receiver of the narrative in the dream, given that some of the events in the dreams may be from what the dreamer has experienced while others are not. Walsh distinguishes memories from dreams, arguing that the former are “representational and narrative but not fictive [while the latter] are representational, fictive and narrative” (147). His argument is informed by the fact that dreams correspond to the realities of the actual world or events in the alternate possible world that dreams create.

Furthermore, dreams have a lot in common with fiction, given that both offer ways of retelling human experiences through the narrative form. Narrative scholar Bert States has extensively researched the link between dreams and narrativity. He asserts that fiction and dreams are products of a creative process that is a form of remembrance, whether of things in a person’s memory or things they associate with. He further notes that, unlike historiography, which deals with facts, dreams and fiction create imaginative or hypothetical events (“Authorship” 237). The counterfactuality of dreams is realised by their ability to plot events that did not occur (or alter those that occurred) in a person’s mind. In the case of *Homegoing*, the plot of Akua’s dreams are things that occurred to her ancestor, Maame, which means they are strange to her even though she might find some aspects familiar. The dreams have no specific setting but seem to reflect the eighteenth-century Gold Coast, introducing Akua to events that occurred

more than a century ago and generating a counterfactual story around the history of slavery and colonialism.

The idea of dreams as alternate possible worlds brings the psychoanalytic and narratological approaches together. To analyse dreams in this way, I draw on Ryan's principle of minimal departure. She avers that "we reconstrue the world of a fiction or of a counterfactual as being the closest possible to the reality we know" (404). In this definition, Ryan considers dreams to be neither fiction nor non-fiction, but non-factuals. She, however, argues that the principle and theories of narrative bring together the fictional and the non-factuals to form an alternate possible world that deviates from the reality of the actual world (404). Thus, the setting of dreams may have some hints of familiarity to the dreamer, but at the same time, the deviation from reality makes them a potent space for mythmaking.

I read Maame's actual experiences in eighteenth-century Gold Coast as the *factual* on one side and her appearance to her descendant as a supernatural agent in dreams, on the other hand, as a rendering of a counterfactual narrative. I will therefore proceed to provide the context of the factual before discussing the counterfactual. In the first section of the novel, where Cobbe Otcher sends Maame away, he also erases her story and instructs his wife that they "will never again speak of what happened today" (3). They create a story that Maame's daughter, Effia, was born of fire and is thus born with a curse. The villagers, who notice the mystery of Effia's birth given that Cobbe Otcher's wife, Baaba, was neither pregnant nor is seen breastfeeding, consider Effia as a 'fire child', which validates Cobbe Otcher's story and establishes the curse of fire trope in the novel's mythopoesis.

However, Cobbe Otcher has the premonition that fabricating the story of Maame and Effia comes with consequences and states that the "memory of the fire that burnt, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued" (3). The narrator makes this clearer after Cobbe and his wife invoke the lie that Effia "was cursed by the fire" to marry her off to one of the British soldiers as a way of sending her away from the village. Cobbe sees the "premonition of the dissolution and destruction of the family lineage, the premonition that he had had the night of the fire, would begin here, with his daughter and the white man" (16). The two statements are both backward-looking and forward-looking counterfactuals. They are backwards-looking counterfactuals because there is a shred of regret from how Cobbe Otcher looks back at his actions and imagines that he could have avoided

them. They are forward-looking in the sense that he predicts the consequences of his actions, and this prediction is associated with “anxiety, fear and hope” (Leicester 197).

Such counterfactuals can be described as vague and thus cannot be evaluated straightforwardly without taking a “time-slice of the actual world” (Kutach 96) and looking into the future. The reader must make adjustments to accommodate his anticipations by finding reasons his generations would go through such suffering. His role in the slave trade gives him the power to rape, send away and attempt to wipe out his servant’s (Maame’s) history. The reader is inclined to believe that Cobbe Otcher knows he deserves punishment for his actions, but this punishment may not be borne by him alone. Accepting Effia’s marriage to the British soldier means that Effia’s descendants will carry the curse of his actions as a Fante slaver and that of the British.

Therefore, the curse that is believed to afflict the descendants of Maame in the narrative starts as a lie in Cobbe Otcher’s household propelled by his desire to cover up his beastliness. The belief that Effia’s descendants are cursed is invoked to explain events, which are impacts of slavery and colonialism. For instance, James, Effia’s grandson who simulates his own death and takes a new identity that strips him of the privilege that the slave trade gives his family, fails to break the notion of the curse. In Kumasi, the new village where he settles, he is called ‘Unlucky’ because he has no known family lineage. Together with his daughter, Abena, they are considered sources of bad luck in the village; the reason it fails to rain for seven years, and crops do not do well. However, the lack of rains can be explained by the fact that as the slave trade expands in the region, the forest that had once been thick and green is encroached and pushed back to accommodate more human settlement. The characters notice this development in their landscape, but they resort to attributing the climate change in the area to James and Abena’s mythical curse. The latter’s move to openly date a married man and get pregnant further justifies their belief that the family is cursed and results in her being sent away.

Until this point, what is clear is that Cobbe Otcher’s narrative about his lineage, which includes Effia’s, is what is passed on. Maame’s version remains buried in the pact of silence that he and his wife had agreed on. While the reader who is following the events as a distant observer from the actual world knows that there is a narrative that has been buried, the textual actual world’s characters, some of whom are Effia’s descendants, have no idea of their past. Gyasi thus creates an alternate possible world through dreams that allows Maame to tell a different story of her lineage to her chosen descendant, Akua. Maame, in the alternate world of the dream, can be

argued to be a counterpart to the textual actual world's Maame because the two share certain characteristics. This is an implicit case of rigid designation, which takes place between the textual actual world and the alternate possible world of the dream.

More importantly, Maame appears as a supernatural agent in the dream world to advance the text's mythmaking potential. According to McNamara et al., supernatural agents appear to dreamers when their agency is diminished. He avers that "agency in humans implies the sense that one is the author of one's own action and that one has the power and capacity to cause things to happen and to implement desired or planned actions" (429). The supernatural agent possesses more powers than the dreamer and influences their cognitive behaviours and actions while asleep. The figure of the supernatural agent is a crucial feature of world religions and mythologies and can take many forms, including animals or hybrids of humans and other strange bodies (McNamara et al. 429). In Akua's dreams, the supernatural agent is a fire taking the shape of a woman, which the reader can associate with Maame. In contrast, Akua, the dreamer, takes longer to interpret the images and figures in the dream. The excerpt below is a section of her first dream where Maame appears:

He returned her fear to her every night in horrible nightmares where fire consumed everything, where it ran from the coast of Fanteland all the way to Asante. In her dreams, the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart. The firewoman would carry these two little girls with her all the way to the woods of the Inland and then the babies would vanish, and the firewoman's sadness would send orange and red and hints of blue swarming every tree and every bush in sight. (177)

As the excerpt above shows, the initial setting of Akua's dreams is Fante. The reader would associate it with Cobbe Otcher's compound where Maame had first been violated, dispossessed of her daughter, then sent away. The alternate possible world of the dream utilises Cobbe Otcher's original lie—that his and Maame's lineage is cursed by the fire. This is the point in the text where the lie attains what is arguably a mythical status with Maame's name dropped for 'firewoman.' The two little girls she carries are presumably Effia and Esi, both of whom were taken away; Effia, by Cobbe Otcher and Esi by the Fante slave traders led by Cobbe's son, Fiifi, who then sell her to the British slavers.

Narratologist Marco Bernini tells us that the alternate possible worlds of dreams are created out of an integration of real places and real histories into the mind of the dreamer to create “an alternate ‘personal geography’: a mixture of experience and imaginative settings with a combination of possible and impossible cartographies” (294). In Akua’s case, the dreams are triggered when she moves from the Cape Coast to Edweso, where one day she sees a white man being burnt as he begs for forgiveness. Therefore, her dreams are set in an alternate world that resembles the scenes at the Cape Coast and Edweso, with the image of the burning white man a constant theme. These scenes in the textual actual world occur in 1895 when the British and the Asante are engaged in war. The British have stolen The Golden Stool and captured the Asante leader—the Asantehene (*Homegoing* 178). The Asante believe that The Golden Stool came from heaven and is treated as a religious and political symbol. Their belief that “if a white man took the Golden Stool, the spirit of the Asante would surely die” (182) triggers a confrontation with the British as Yaa Asantewaa demands a war to rescue the Asantehene and the Golden Stool. She declares that “if the men would not do it, the women would” (182). It is worth noting that Yaa Asantewaa, the historical figure, is not a character but is only mentioned in the novel. The words that the narrator attributes to her are the same ones that are recorded in Ghanaian archives (Brempong 99; Steady 13). Gyasi’s decision to insert this aspect of historical fact in the novel unaltered strategically situates the immediate setting that triggers Akua’s dreams to a historical moment in the actual world. Akua is depicted as one of the women singing songs that praise the bravery of Yaa Asantewaa and counterfactually imagines how things would have turned out as the passage below shows:

The war ended in September, and the earth around them began to register the Asante loss... Crops died, and food was limited, for they had given all they had to the men who were fighting. They had given all they had, assured that it would come back to them in the abundance of freedom. Yaa Asantewaa, Edweso’s warrior Queen Mother, was exiled to Seychelles, never to be seen again by those who lived in the village. Sometimes Akua would walk by her palace in her wanderings and wonder: what if? (191)

The counterfactual ‘what if?’ at the end of the statement above reimagines events that could have taken place but did not. If the war had not occurred, Yaa Asantewaa would have had no reason to lead the calls for resistance, which means she would still be in Edweso. Furthermore, in a scenario where the war did not take place, Akua and the rest of the Edweso women would have food because it would mean that no men fighting in the war would need such supplies.



However, any change to the antecedents above to a situation where they do not occur would mean retracing an even longer chain of violence going back before the arrival of the foreign slave traders. In other words, to imagine a situation where the Asante-British war (the first antecedent in the above excerpt) does not happen is to imagine a scenario where slavery does not take place because the two were conjoined. The counterfactual question Akua poses in the excerpt above further suggests that if all the above events did not occur, the white man would not have been burnt by an angry Asante public in Edweso. This scenario would mean that her dreams would not have been triggered. Therefore, the reality from which the alternate possible world of her dreams is drawn stretches a long way, tracing Gold Coast's entire history and revealing the complexities in the histories of slavery in Ghana.

The image of a fire in the shape of a woman constitutes the impossible or unreal. Ryan avers that such strange and unusual imageries in alternate possible worlds such as dreams are described "by means of sentences containing explicit markers of irreality and representing consequently the point of view of a member of the actual world" (406). Decoding Akua's dream world requires the reader to make a choice between two options. Reading Maame as a historical figure in the textual world requires the reader to relinquish their perspective as an observer from the actual world and imagine that they are a member of the textual universe. Alternatively, the reader can remain detached from the textual universe, which allows them a superior vantage point from which to watch all that is happening in the text. However, in the last option, the principle of minimal departure cannot be applied to Maame because she is not a historical figure from the actual world.

The alternate possible worlds of dreams in the text alternate with the textual actual world, allowing the narrator to use the intervals to provide contexts to the settings and themes of the dreams. This also helps the reader to string together the plot of the dreams. As Akua continues to experience the dreams, she no longer just receives the imageries from the dream world but also begins to find familiarity and converses with the firewoman. This means that she temporarily ceases to be a character in the textual actual world as she becomes a part of the alternate possible world of the dream. This explains why she screams on waking because of the extra-normal settings and figures of the dream world. Her screams as she gets back to the textual actual world shock the other characters who witness her unusual behaviour and conclude that she is a "crazy woman" (193).

I read the instances when she is called sick or ‘crazy’ as moments when Akua’s mind is unable to balance the textual actual world and the alternate possible world of the dream. This is informed by her familiarity with the woman, and as I have discussed above, the dreams are triggered by events, some of which she has experienced. Akua’s inability to balance the two worlds is depicted in the scene where she burns her children while she is still asleep. Below is the first part of the dream:

In dreamland, Akua walked to the edge of the rolling ocean. She dipped her toe into the water so cool she felt she could taste it, like a breeze hitting the back of the throat. Then the breeze turned hot as the ocean caught fire. The breeze from the back of Akua’s throat began to swirl, round and round, gathering speed until it could no longer be contained within Akua’s mouth, and so she shot it out. And the spit-out breeze began to move the fiery ocean, dipping down into the depths to collect itself until spiraling wind and fiery ocean became the woman that Akua now felt she knew so well. (196-197)

Akua’s dream begins by announcing the setting to be in the ocean, which slowly turns into the firewoman. This is the first instance in the alternate world of the dream where the images of fire and water are coming together. As I discussed earlier, fire represents Maame’s and Effia’s line of the family. The ocean and water represent Esi’s line (Maame’s other daughter sold across the ocean). The dream, therefore, suggests that first, the firewoman seeks to introduce Akua to both sides of Maame’s family. Secondly, Akua has a deeper relationship with fire and water; on the day she was born, the white missionaries at the Cape Coast drowned her mother, Abena, while trying to force her into baptism, and then burnt her body in the forest because she would not repent for carrying Akua, “her sin” (189). For her, therefore, water and fire symbolise personal pain that she is aware of and generational violence through slavery and colonialism that the dreams help her understand. As the above dream continues, Akua further loses her agency and becomes a helpless victim of the firewoman as she takes control of her actions as the second part of the dream shows below:

This time, the firewoman was not angry. She beckoned Akua out onto the ocean, and though afraid, Akua took her first step. Her feet burned. When she lifted one up, she could smell her own flesh wafting from the bottom.... Now in the firewoman’s arms were two fire children that she had held the first time Akua dreamed of her.... Their cries were soundless, but Akua could see the sound

floating out of their mouths like puffs of smoke from the fetish man's favored pipe. Akua had the urge to hold them, and she reached out her hands to them. Her hands caught fire, but she touched them still. Soon, she cradled them with her own burning hands, playing with the braided ropes of fire that made up their hair, their coal-black lips. She felt calm, happy even, that the firewoman had found her children again at last. And as she held them, the firewoman did not protest. She did not try to snatch them away. Instead, she watched, crying from joy. And her tears were the color of the ocean water in Fanteland, that not-green, not-blue color that Akua remembered from her youth. The color began to gather. Blue and more blue. Green and more green. Until the torrent of tears began to put out the fire in Akua's hands. Until the children began to disappear. (197)

From the first section of the dream, where Akua is introduced to an extra-normal setting, the second part above is more familiar. Akua's inability to balance the world of the dreams and her waking world is complicated by the fact that as the dreams grow worse, she begins to move as if she is joining the settings and participating in the dream physically. This is why in the above dream, the firewoman whom she has grown to know seems to take control of her mind and actions, guiding her to burn her own hut with her family in it. Akua, however, does not return to the textual actual world even when her own hands catch fire because she is finally seeing the firewoman happier than she has seen her before. She believes that the burning children in the alternate possible world of the dream are the firewoman's children who have been returned to her.

Akua's physical participation in the dream exemplifies McNamara's argument that characters in dreams, including the dreamer, can be transformed into the supernatural agent (438). This explains why even though the reader is no longer sure of who starts the fire, it is Akua who is accosted by the Edweso villagers and banished to live in the forest for killing her children. This denotes a negative consequence of the dream world in the sense that it is impossible for the dreamer to have control over their actions in both worlds. The activities in the two worlds are quite different, and therefore the dreamer attempting to participate in the dream world means doing something else in the textual actual world that may be detrimental. Akua loses her agency as a human and becomes a supernatural agent. She does not get back to her normal self even when she is marched to the forest to be punished. Her delayed return from the dream world is due to the new role she believes she is playing in helping the firewoman get back her lost children—Effia and Esi. Dreams' potentiality, as spaces for mythmaking and counterfactual

imagination, is thus foregrounded by their capacity to create and even alter characters to perform new and different roles.

Gyasi formulates a complex entanglement between dreams and oral storytelling where Akua, the character in the dream world, gets a chance to report the events to a different audience on her waking state. States posits that storytelling and dreams are produced by the same 'skill'; telling a story in a waking state is to dream under a different circumstance with more control and filter to the dream's plot ("Authorship" 239). Akua's only surviving son, Yaw, becomes a history teacher at the Cape Coast, helping his students to learn history from storytelling and not what they are taught in textbooks. To demonstrate his assertion that history is storytelling, he allows the students to tell the stories they have heard about the scars on his face and hands. These are the scars he sustained on the night his mother, Akua, burnt their house, killing his two sisters. When he asks which of the stories is 'correct', one of his students answers that "we cannot know which story is correct because we were not there" (226). Even Yaw begins telling his story with, "I was only a baby. All I know is what I've heard" (227). This suggests that despite being the bearer of the scars, he is relinquishing the power that his students anticipate his version of the story holds and adds to the multiple versions they have already told. This classroom engagement with Yaw's past shows a selective understanding of history and how power shapes our engagement with the past.

To learn more about the story of his scar, he has to visit his mother, Akua, who asks him: "how can I tell you the story of your scar without first telling you the story of my dreams? And how do I talk about my dreams without talking about my family? Our family" (240). By getting a chance to tell Yaw about his scars, Akua also gets an opportunity to reorganise the images in her dreams in a new context of storytelling. Whereas in the dreams, she is a character and experiences every moment as a member of the alternate world with no other reality to compare with, reporting her dreams to Yaw allows her to 'edit' the scenes and images and use the reality of the textual actual world to perceive graphical figures such as the firewoman whom she is able to associate with her ancestry. She understands that by constructing a more coherent story of the firewoman for Yaw, who was not a character in her dream to understand, she has to retell the dream such that it acquires a beginning, middle and an ending. These are aspects of the plot that dreams do not have because dreamers join the alternate world of dreams in the middle or a crisis and leave before the dream reaches the end (States "Dreaming" 27).

Akua's reorganisation of the plot structure of her dreams allows her and her descendants to make sense of and uncover the history of Maame, which Cobbe Otcher and his wife, Baaba, had colluded to silence, effectively silencing the history of an entire lineage. Maame (firewoman), as a supernatural agent helping Akua, recontextualises the horrors of slavery and their long-lasting effects on their line of the family by infusing it with multiple meanings that integrate long term memories. Akua and her granddaughter, Marjorie, have a ritualistic visit to the ocean each time the latter visits Ghana from America. Akua tells her that this is a way of "reminding her how to come home" (268). Coming home, for Akua, means introducing Marjorie to the ancestors that appear in her dreams. She narrates one of her dreams to Marjorie, which depicts a deep connection with an unknown past:

In my dreams, I kept seeing this castle but I did not know why. One day, I came to these waters and I could feel the spirits of our ancestors calling to me. Some were free, and they spoke to me from the sand, but some others were trapped deep, deep, deep in the water so that I had to wade out to hear their voices. I waded out so far, the water almost took me down to meet those spirits that were trapped so deep in the sea that they would never be free. (268)

The dream above introduces Akua to Esi's line of the family and the other Akans who drowned while being shipped across the ocean to America. Ma Aku, who is shipped together with Esi, finds it evil for black people to be working and maintaining boats, "the things that had brought them to America in the first place, the very things that had tried to drag them under" (*Homegoing* 111). She is, however, nostalgic about water and imagines the ocean taking her back to Africa. Both Esi and Ma Aku's stories of the ocean crossing are only accessible to the reader and not the other characters in the text, such as Akua. Therefore, her dreams attempt to capture these stories and connect her to "the great unknown primeval deep or the collective unconscious" (Hogh 413) that water symbolises.

The counterfactual role that the dreams perform in the text is to allow Maame to narrate her silenced family history to Akua through horrific images which affect her mentally. Gyasi strategically mythologises Maame for this specific purpose, imagining an alternate world where she gets a chance to converse with her generations. The family story that the dreams create therefore foregrounds the experiences of Maame, not as a woman whose descendants are cursed by fire, but one who has lost her family to various forms of slavery both in Ghana and America. By setting the alternate worlds of the dreams in places that have been narrated

earlier in the text, Gyasi enables a re-narration or alternative narration of what happened in those scenes. This means that the dreams offer a space for remembering slavery in a way that questions the factual history of slavery and colonialism. It allows Gyasi to narrate the emotional impact of slavery that history has no capacity to render.

To conclude this chapter, I return to Makumbi's short story that I introduced at the beginning, where a group of women rescues Nnam from dispossession by insisting on hearing her side of the story. Nnam's attempted silencing demonstrates how myths sanction gender stereotypes that disadvantage women. In contrast, the women's intervention is an invitation to pause and reconsider the destructive effects of relying on oppressive aspects of myths in particular, and traditions, in general. I have discussed how Makumbi and Gyasi's works engage with myths (as traditional tales) to interrogate them, moving away from their twentieth-century predecessors who appropriated myths in their works as the "bedrock of national consciousness" (Meletinsky 277). A counterfactual analysis of *Kintu* and *Homegoing* reveals that the two writers utilise the interactions between mythological worlds and actual world histories to reimagine the representations of women in Ugandan and Ghanaian pasts.

In *Kintu*, my analysis reveals that Makumbi utilises counterfactual elements such as the rigid designator to recast the figure of Kintu in different worlds, which allows her not only to demystify his depiction in Buganda as the 'father of the nation' but also to reimagine the roles and contributions of women. There is thus an interesting interplay between myth and history in the novel where Makumbi uses history to unsettle myth and also myth to unsettle history. A counterfactual reading of the novel, therefore, enables comparisons between the textual universe and the actual world, unravelling more roles for women. In *Homegoing*, I read Gyasi's characterisation, especially of Maame, as a strategic counterfactual reworking of the Akan supreme deity, Nyame, depicting her as a victim of slavery to foreground slavery's destruction of Akan's family core. The mythic invocation of fire and water in the novel responds to the extreme violence of slavery and ways of expressing the destructiveness of both western and African cultures, which can incorporate such violence. A counterfactual reading of the novel, therefore, reveals what trauma does to historical narratives and how mythology intervenes as a form of healing. Both Makumbi and Gyasi are thus drawn to their nation's mythical framework as an inspiration for telling women's stories properly in their myths and history. In the next chapter, I use historical fiction to investigate how the counterfactual theory can be used to contest the mythologising function of History.

## Chapter Three

### African Women in Wartime Narratives: A Counterfactual Retelling

[H]e has come to understand that it is impossible to connect what happened to what will. What he knows is this: there is no past, there is no ‘what happened,’ there is only the moment that unfolds into the next. (Mengiste 410)

This chapter engages this dissertation’s second understanding of myth—History as myth. Eric Selbin argues that History (with the capital ‘H’) is “the myth created by the powerful to explain how it is that we have arrived at the place we find ourselves and why things are how they are and should be...” (49). Nationalist histories are often considered the ‘official’ memories, held on a pedestal and thus mythologised. They, therefore, hold the same power as that of History in Selbin’s postulations. I use Maaza Mengiste’s *The Shadow King* and Nadifa Mohamed’s *The Orchard of Lost Souls* to examine how the counterfactual mode can strip History of its dominance and mythic status by introducing alternative versions of a past where History claims authority over facts. I am interested in discussing how the imagined alternative versions of Ethiopian and Somalian histories reveal more roles for women that are not consistent with the two nation’s nationalist histories.

The two authors whose works I discuss in this chapter take specific periods of war in their respective nations as the starting point of their reimagination of women’s roles. As I have mentioned in Chapter One, this departs from Catherine Gallagher’s conservative approach to counterfactuals, where she categorises counterfactual novels into two: “alternate-history” novels and “alternate history” novels (2). The former reimagines an alternative outcome of the past by fictionalising key figures, places, and the chronology of events. The latter deploys real figures from the actual world as characters in real places and imagines an alternative outcome of the represented historical events (Gallagher 2). In both categories, the outcome is different from what is recorded in actual world history, which is not the case with the novels I consider in this chapter. However, Gallagher’s notion of “counterhistories”, which is closely related to the above categories, provides a useful way of reading these novels as counterfactual. Counterhistories may fictionalise figures and places or use real figures and places from the actual world, but instead of imagining alternative outcomes, they focus on elided, forgotten, or misrepresented stories (Gallagher 2). As I mentioned in Chapter One, Gallagher recognises counterhistories as different kinds of counterfactuals. I have also argued that this kind of

counterfactuality is not necessarily consciously initiated by the author but instead their use of the counterfactual can be teased out through literary analysis. Furthermore, the two novels fit into Andreas Widmann's understanding of counterfactuality in the sense that, in excavating the elided stories of women in Ethiopia and Somalia, both Mengiste and Mohammed destabilise some key cornerstones of nationalist histories, such as its masculine nature (188).

While defending the nation by going to war is deemed the prerogative of men, as I will discuss later in this chapter, women have always taken part in the battlefield. The two wars that Mengiste and Mohammed represent in these narratives form part of their respective countries' nationalist struggles where women symbolise the nation even though their stories are suppressed by male-authored histories (Enloe 88). Cynthia Enloe further asserts that women's experiences are seldomly given attention by nationalist movements when comprehending liberation struggles and their impacts. Instead, they tend to be rooted in "the masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope" (93). Her assertions are buttressed by historian Anne McClintock, who avers that "all nationalisms are gendered, invented and dangerous" (352). I argue that any work of fiction that foregrounds the misrepresentation of historical facts by highlighting women's roles is engaging in a counterfactual retelling of nationalist histories.

Consequently, my argument in this chapter considers the nationalist history and its masculine nature as the fact and the fictionalised versions that Mengiste and Mohamed offer as counterfact. Christ's study of counterfactual feminist fiction presents the "binary of fact versus counterfact" as constructed "along the lines of male versus female" (190). She contends that the male, according to feminist thought, is the norm—the figure around which society is organised and who enjoys the benefits of the status quo. In contrast, the female is the marked Other and seeks to take a different path from the norm—a path that reorganises society to the advantage of all (Christ 190).

Counterfactuals work in different ways to foreground the roles and experiences of women during the periods of war in the two novels. In *The Shadow King*, the counterfactuals are realised as the narrator's constructions. My analysis of the novel unfolds in three parts. In the first part, I provide a critical overview and establish the text's general counterfactual moments. In the second part, I discuss the use of images as potential counterfactual strategies. I suggest that the wartime images used in the text are frozen moments from the past and can have multiple interpretations depending on time and context. These interpretations draw our



attention to how women could have participated in the war. The third part of my analysis considers the use of songs in the text as tools for disnarration. My argument here draws on the concept of ‘the disnarrated’—a broad storytelling strategy that is closely linked with the counterfactuals, which I discussed in Chapter One as “terms, phrases, and passages that consider what did not or does not take place (‘this could’ve happened but didn’t’; ‘this didn’t happen but could’ve’), [either] they pertain to the narrator and his or her narration” (Prince 299). It can be useful in contesting the linearity of nationalist histories by imagining scenarios that either dismiss, add details or confirm it as the actual account of the past. My discussion will show how the songs Mengiste refers to contain both facts and misrepresentations, which is the nature of nationalist histories.

In *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, I examine a different use of the counterfactuals where they are simulated in the minds of the three female protagonists. They imagine scenarios that disnarrate either the actual events that caused them trauma or the counterfactuals they had imagined to get through such trauma. I propose that the events that these characters disnarrate, whether real in the textual actual world or their counterfactuals (of the real events), draw our attention to women’s roles and experiences during the Somalia coup, which was a defining moment in the history of the country.

### **In the Shadows of Men’s War: Performing History in Maaza Mengiste’s *The Shadow King***

In Mengiste’s debut novel, *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* (2010), the fictional Haile Selassie, faced with an imminent coup, makes a statement that suggests that the independence of the nation was achieved through the bravery of men who fought off Italian troops in two separate wars and strategically ignores the contribution of women. He says that: “in this kingdom of men, angels walked amongst us, flesh and spirit side by side, fiery swords next to spears. Wings beat back bullets, bent Italian rifles, flattened tanks” (Mengiste, *Beneath* 107). The statement draws our attention to how the history of war is written to advance the notion that the nation and the fight for nationhood belong to men. Achille Mbembe contends that “nationalism conceptualises power as a masculinist prerogative and firmly inscribes resistance in the framework of a war between men” and that the “birthing of the nation is almost always akin to the birthing of manhood” (170). The history of the Ethiopian nation, as depicted in Selassie’s statement above, is exclusionary. A counterfactual retelling of Ethiopian history, as Mengiste does in *The*

*Shadow King*, therefore, constitutes rendering what Mbembe calls “other historical alternatives” to the grand national narratives of the nation (Mbembe 172).

The absence of women in Ethiopian history has been attributed to a lack of access to historical sources that tell their stories. Most scholars argue that women took active roles in the Italo-Ethiopian wars and other wars that shaped Ethiopian nationhood. Historian Laura Belcher notes that untranslated Portuguese and Ethiopian sources reveal that noblewomen in Ethiopia were instrumental in confronting and defeating the Portuguese who attempted to convert the nation to Roman Catholicism in the seventeenth century (7). She notes that the Portuguese accounts of the period—unofficial personal memoirs and letters—were not published until the twentieth century. However, even these were only focused on portraying the noblewomen negatively. The African accounts of the encounter were recorded in Ethiopian royal chronicles, which described such women as saints (7). Belete Bizuneh, an Ethiopian historian, notes that despite the royal chronicles being crucial sources for uncovering Ethiopian history, they were androcentric and, in most cases, only documented marriage alliances and a chronology of war (21). Both Belcher and Bizuneh seem to agree that despite the negative portrayal of the Ethiopian noblewomen by the Portuguese and the incomplete telling of their roles by the royal chroniclers, the two sources reveal that women played significant roles in seventeenth-century Ethiopia.

Ethiopian women were prohibited from taking part in the 1935–1941 war. Historians Tsehai Silassie and Tsehai Silissie note that Emperor Haile Selassie issued a decree restricting women from participating in the war. They add that women could only be on the battlefield based on their relation to men—either as part of their domestic personnel or if the woman came from a family where there was no male member to use the family rifle, which was an important possession. There were, however, exceptional cases when women were on the battlefield as organisers and leaders of guerrilla troops without deriving their authority from men (75). The absence of these exceptional women in history links back to Bizuneh’s earlier argument that the nation’s chronicling remained masculine during the 1935–41 Italo-Ethiopian war, just as it was in seventeenth-century Ethiopia.

Unlike most African nations where Europeans left a “central colonial archive” (Bizuneh 22), Ethiopia relies on foreign archives, such as Italy and Portugal, to access some aspects of its history. Bizuneh, therefore, argues that oral sources have been some of the most accurate repositories of such periods. These include “personal and family histories...proverbs, poems

and songs” (22). *The Shadow King* relies on historical facts gathered from both the foreign archives and oral sources. In an interview with Wadzanai Mhute for *The New York Times*, Mengiste notes that to access the uncensored histories of Ethiopian women who fought in the 1935–1941 Italo-Ethiopian war, she had to use the Italian archive, which still keeps important material of the period. She notes that she relied on recorded battle songs by both Ethiopian and Italian soldiers, journals, diaries, and shared photographs by Italian troops to narrate the stories of Ethiopian women who fought alongside men (para.12).

The novel is divided into four parts: ‘Waiting’, ‘Resistance’, ‘Returns’, and ‘Reunions.’ It explores women’s roles during the war, especially after the Emperor fled the country in the middle of the war. The novel is introduced in a 1974 setting where Hirut, an older woman who took part in the 1935–1941 Italo-Ethiopian war, has travelled for two days to the Addis Ababa train station carrying an old rifle and a box full of photographs, newspaper cuttings, and letters. The box belongs to Ettore Navarra, a Jewish-Italian photographer and a former soldier with the Italian army. The two met during the war at an Italian camp where Hirut was a prisoner. Ettore was assigned to capture the Italian atrocities towards the Ethiopians at the camp and on the battlefield.

Hirut, having struggled for 41 years to forget the war, hopes that she will be free from the memories of the battlefield after handing over the box to Ettore. However, these memories are rekindled as she walks through the busy streets of Addis Ababa, where young school children are marching against the Emperor and in support of the impending coup. She carries the same rifle she inherited from her father and used during the war, attracting stares from the young demonstrators. They are shocked at the image of an older woman carrying a weapon. The narrator takes the reader into Hirut’s mind where she is thinking about how the demonstrators have been taught an incomplete history, which makes them believe that women played no roles during the war:

[A]s if they did not know those who came before them. As if this were the first time a woman carried a gun. As if the ground beneath their feet had not been won by some of the greatest fighters Ethiopia had ever known, women named Aster, Nardos, Abebech, Tsedale, Aziza, Hanna, Meaza, Aynadis, Debru, Yodit, Ililta, Abeba, Kidist, Belaynesh, Meskerem, Nunu, Tigist, Tsehai, Beza, Saba, and a woman simply called the cook. (4)

In other words, the statement by Hirut suggests that if it had not been for women fighting in the war, the history of Ethiopia would have taken a different course. The names she mentions belong to the Ethiopian women in the textual actual world, but this is also Mengiste's way of imagining and naming women who were on the battlefield in the actual war but remain unnamed. The statement, therefore, is counterfactual in the sense that it directly contradicts a statement made in the textual actual world of another text; the statement from *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, with which I introduced this section of the chapter, where the Emperor suggests that it was men who fought off the Italian troops. Furthermore, the statement responds to the masculine nature of actual world Ethiopian history, which scholars such as Bizuneh have claimed do not have sufficient information regarding the women who fought in the real war and their roles.

The fact that the cook in the above excerpt is not named signals a complex case of rigid designation. As Silassie and Silisie argue, during the 1935 Italo-Ethiopian and the wars before, women went to the battlefield as part of male soldiers' domestic personnel. Their roles, which excluded fighting, depended on the ranks of the men they accompanied but mainly involved preparing meals and looking after the wounded soldiers (74). My argument that 'the cook' is a rigid designator in the novel is therefore informed by the fact that there could have been a number of Ethiopian women on the battlefield who were only known by the domestic roles they performed, such as cooking. By having 'the cook' as one of the characters in the novel, Mengiste is both signalling the erasure of their identities and emphasising the fact that they did more on the battlefield than the domestic roles from which their names were derived. This is seen in the second part of the novel, where Hirut and 'the cook' join the war as part of the male soldiers' domestic personnel but eventually play key roles as fighters who defeat the Italian troops. At the end of the novel, our attention is further drawn to 'the cook' as a proper name for women on the battlefield. Hirut's memory of the women who became the 'Shadow King' this time lists her more than once:

[A]nd the cook, the cook, the cook, and as she says their names, feels them gather around her and urge her on: Tell them, Hirut, we were the Shadow King. We were those who stepped into a country left dark by an invading plague and gave hope to Ethiopia's people. (423)

The excerpt emphasises my argument that many misnamed or forgotten women's roles in the nationalist struggle against the Italian troops were not recognised. The introduction of the

‘Shadow King’ in this excerpt is also counterfactual in various ways. First, in the second part of the novel, where the narrator takes us back to the 1935–1941 Italo-Ethiopian war, the reader is made to believe that the ‘Shadow King’ is an individual, Minim, a peasant and the Emperor’s doppelganger who is discovered by Hirut and made to lead the country in the absence of the Emperor. Secondly, the ‘Shadow King’ is presented as a movement or a political ideology bringing together women and men who fought against the Italian troops at that moment in Ethiopian history when there seemed to be a leadership vacuum.

According to Ethiopian nationalist histories, Emperor Haile Selassie left Ethiopia to seek support from the international community. He lived in exile in the United Kingdom until the war was over in 1941 (Campbell 27). Despite his absence during the war, History presents him as an indomitable leader who fought off all forms of colonial occupation of Ethiopia. This makes him one of the most mythologised political figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Africa and beyond. According to Ethiopian historian Asfa-Wossen Asserate, who claims to come from the same bloodline as the Emperor, his name, ‘Haile Selassie’, means “power of the trinity” and that “his dynasty descended from the biblical King Solomon, and the world called him the ‘Victorious Lion of Judah’” (v). In the novel, however, Mengiste uses the rigid designator to introduce a different figure of Haile Selassie. He is portrayed as a broken man who is affected by the Italian invasion of his country and is also going through family challenges due to his political miscalculations. Having forcibly married off his daughter in the hope of building a stronger political alliance, his new son-in-law signs a pact with the Italian troops. His daughter dies mysteriously shortly afterwards. The mental turmoil he is undergoing further weakens his grip on the fast-falling nation, forcing him to flee to the United Kingdom, knowing that it is only a matter of time before the Italian troops will take over the capital. This is counterfactual to Ethiopian nationalist histories, as Campbell states above. While in the actual world, his exile is believed to be one of his ingenious political calculations, in the textual world Haile Selassie goes to exile out of fear of meeting the same kind of death he has witnessed his trusted generals face.

Nevertheless, in both the actual world and the textual actual world, the Emperor is absent as the war rages on and only returns after it ends. Therefore, the idea of the ‘Shadow King’, which is central in the novel, is first and foremost a demythologising of the actual Haile Selassie as a representation of History’s romanticising of male political figures. This is introduced early in the novel in the scene where Hirut encounters an older man at the train station in Addis who

seems to share in her disappointment at the demonstrators. While Hirut is disappointed that the young demonstrators possibly only know the partial histories of Ethiopia that they learn in school, the older man's disappointment comes from the notion that the demonstrators are ignorant of the Emperor's mythical bravery and indomitability. He, therefore, does not see them as a serious challenge to Selassie's leadership. He remarks that: "if Mussoloni (sic) couldn't get rid of the Emperor, what do these students think they are doing?" (4). The contrasting perceptions of the Emperor by Hirut and the man are counterfactual, drawing our attention to how those on the battlefield have a different (more factual) memory of events than those who witnessed it from the peripheries and participated in mythologising historical figures like Selassie.

The last section of the novel presents an interesting plot twist where the Emperor, subdued by the uprising in the capital, is approaching the train station, escaping while dressed as a peasant. Hirut, who is also at the station waiting to deliver the box of wartime photographs to Ettore, notices the striking resemblance between Minim, the 'Shadow King' whom she served as a bodyguard, and the Emperor in his new attire as a peasant. Her remarks to the Emperor that: "Your Majesty. I'll be your guard" (423) is a key counterfactual moment in the text; the Emperor, in this case, and the actual world, is overthrown and is once again looking for a way out of the country to safety. Counterfactuality is realised by the fact that Mengiste presents him as assuming the identity of a peasant, while 41 years ago, during the war, Minim had been asked to forgo his peasant identity and dress as an Emperor to inspire the nation. The contrast is foregrounded by the fact that while Minim returned to his life as a peasant after the war ended, Haile Selassie, who had been absent, got mythologised by History as the war hero. The figure of the Emperor dressed as Minim, therefore, undermines his invincibility and endorses the notion of the 'Shadow King' as a movement of peasants that saved the country from Italy's invasion but is not adequately recognised.

Mengiste focuses the reader's attention on Hirut's memory as bearing an alternative history that recognises marginalised women's voices in Ethiopian nationalist history and reinserting them back as key contributors. The story of the 1935–1941 Italo-Ethiopian war in the novel comes from Hirut's attempts to compare the coup that awaits her as she arrives in Addis Ababa 41 years after the war ended. In the novel, Hirut is introduced as a young woman who is recently orphaned and joins the family of Kidane—a commander in the Emperor's army—and his wife, Aster, as a domestic servant. Aster and Kidane are married through what Bizuneh describes as

“contracted marriage alliances” (13). This is a strategy that Haile Selassie used in the actual world to integrate noble clans into imperial politics. Similarly, in the novel, the union between Aster and Kidane is key to the fictional Emperor’s political alliances in strengthening his grip on the empire.

Aster, who is still mourning the death of their son, openly shows disdain for Hirut, whom she thinks Kidane has brought to take her place. The tension between the two women heightens when Aster discovers and steals Hirut’s Wujigra—the gun she had inherited from her father. Such weapon inheritance was a common practice in actual world Ethiopia. Rifles were symbolic of social status, and owning one accorded a person certain privileges such as inheriting land, which was under the control of the military. Men who possessed weapons and land found an easy way into the military. Women who had a similar inheritance from their fathers could also be permitted to perform minor military or administrative duties (Silassie and Silissie 74). The value that Hirut attaches to her Wujigra is therefore both emotional and cultural, reflected by the effort she puts into searching and trying to recover it from Aster. Silassie and Silissie stress the importance of such rifles to ordinary Ethiopians before and during the 1935–1941 war, noting that when the Italian troops conducted a disarmament exercise in Addis Ababa, Ethiopians fled the city to protect their rifles. Those who could not flee hid their rifles (Silassie and Silissie 74). The fear of losing one’s rifle meant the loss of a prized inheritance, a portion of memory, and the loss of an opportunity to participate in certain activities.

As Hirut searches for her rifle, the Emperor declares war against the Italian troops, urging all Ethiopians to join the fight. Aster sees the war as a chance to leave the restrictive confines of her home and show her patriotism on the battlefield. On the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian war in the actual world, Haile Selassie issued a decree prohibiting women from participating in the war (Silassie and Silissie 75). In the novel, there is no such decree; the Emperor declares war through direct communication to his generals like Kidane. However, the Emperor’s wife, Empress Menen, makes a public address urging women to “voice and express solidarity against” the Italian troops’ invasion (*The Shadow King* 74). Aster interprets the Empress’ message as a call on women to take up arms and join the war. By donning an old tunic and a cape belonging to her husband’s father, Aster assumes the masculine authority that comes with the attire and moves around acquiring weapons and rallying Ethiopian women to join the war. She insists that she has earned the right to join the war as a fighter. Therefore, she splits her

roles by supervising the women in preparing meals and nursing the wounded while also continuing to acquire rifles and gathering intelligence. The defiant image of Aster in this scene reflects that of Wayzaro Lekelash Bayan, one of the few female fighters whose roles in the actual Italo-Ethiopian war are recorded. Just like Aster, she wore masculine attire, “tied her four-month-old daughter on her back and fought to protect the land and the Church” from the Italian troops (Silassie and Sillissie 78). The details of her participation in the war are among the few that Silassie and Sillissie recovered through oral interviews of women who survived the 1935–1941 war. They note that from the interviews, it is clear that many women participated in the war, but there is no evidence in History to support the oral reports (78).

*The Shadow King* probes how women are seen during the war, how they are remembered after that, and how they remember the war. During the war, men position themselves as the bearers of the responsibility to fight for the nation. This is seen more clearly in Kidane’s attempts at stopping Aster from joining the war as a fighter and instead restricting her roles to feeding and nursing ‘his’ wounded soldiers. Even after forcing their way to the battlefield, the female soldiers are expected to do more than their male counterparts. Their bodies are seen as trophies and territories of conquest in the war, violated by their compatriots and the external aggressors. Kidane, for instance, is seen as the hero in the eyes of the male Ethiopian soldiers but is also a rapist who has assaulted Aster and Hirut. Both Hirut and Aster want to kill him in revenge. Hirut seems to recover her agency in the scene where she kills him and declares: “I am a soldier...I am Getey’s daughter. They will forget you and remember me” (398). However, this remains a secret between her and Ettore, the only person to see her choking Kidane to death.

This section of the chapter establishes that exclusions in the narrative of history can be deliberate, especially in the case of Ethiopia, where the archive is in a foreign land and only accessible to those with the means to travel and conduct studies in the European capitals such as Rome. Yet, this archival material can be utilised, such as Mengiste does, to give a glimpse of what happened during the war as backed by historians and oral sources while also using the same material to imagine what might have happened but is not told for some reason. In the next section, I discuss how Mengiste employs photos and songs to render a counterfactual narrative that challenges the linear history of the war.



## Songs, Memories and the Disnarrated

In her review of *The Shadow King*, the Zambian novelist Namwali Serpell writes that Mengiste “manages to solve the riddle of how to sing war now” (para.4). Serpell draws our attention to Mengiste’s unique approach to writing wartime narratives about women without making the whole story about their victimhood. According to Ethiopian historian Minale Adugna women’s roles during the war, besides the caregiving I highlighted in the previous section, mobilised men to fight by composing songs that praised their valour and bravery and derided the cowards who would not join the war. Their songs also justified some wars as necessary and denounced those they felt were unnecessary (4). Serpell’s statement above also literally means that *The Shadow King* sings glories of women who took part in the war by shedding light on the prominent roles they might have played.

As mentioned in the previous section, Mengiste uses songs from the Italian archive and the Ethiopian public. Worth noting is that she does not include the actual songs but only mentions important sections that present a contrary view of what took place in the textual actual world (which in this case resembles the actual world) or when the narrator wants to contradict such sections. The songs are a mixture of fiction and facts and reflect how songs construct a different version of the past and challenge some misrepresentations by History. The sections of the songs are strategically placed to disrupt an ongoing narration, allowing the narrator to pause and address the reader directly, adding or discounting information to what has been narrated. The new information either contradicts the narration or further explains the narrated version. I consider this as an aspect of Prince’s concept of the disnarrated in the sense that the narrator discounts what they consider as inaccurate by introducing negations that offer contradicting events. According to Prince, the disnarrated is a broad concept that covers “events that do not happen, but nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text” (299). The following excerpt from the scene where Aster and Kidane clash over her involvement in the war is an example of such disruption:

And here is where history falters. According to popular song, Kidane is interrupted by Aster, who appears like a ghost next to her husband. The story goes on that on the day the great Kidane mobilised his men, a lone figure arose from her bed to heed his call to fight. They say the sight of those men gathered around her beloved husband pulled Aster back from her untended sorrows and carried her from her bedroom to her veranda to stand at her husband's side,

clothed for war in his cape and lion's mane headdress. But Aster does not rise from her bed and walk to her husband while dressed in his clothes. She does not take her husband's hand and pledge her allegiance. She does not ask to be forgiven for her unfettered grief and anger. She does not swear to die at his feet if he should fall defending their country. She does not, in fact, touch her womb and declare more sons for Kidane's army...No. Aster stands up from her bed, dressed in black, and makes her way to her husband's office. She moves, uncapped and unapologetic, out of the land of the aggrieved...And legend will never tell that Aster also realises that all she once loved is truly gone. The Aster of those famous songs will come later, but even then, she will be a legend molded by her own device. (Mengiste, *The Shadow King* 61–62)

The first sentence in the above excerpt is a negation that emphasises an alternate version of events that contradicts how Aster is portrayed in the song. The sentence juxtaposes the unnamed popular song with the narrator's memories, who knows every detail about Aster and the chronology of the war and thus claims to present a more reliable version of events. The phrase 'history falters' particularly draws our attention to the instability of Ethiopian nationalist histories; they are selective and incomplete in representing women—a myth. The first four sentences of the excerpt present a distorted masculine version of events and depict Kidane and his men as Aster's main inspiration to join the battlefield. It reflects the actual history of the war, in which Ethiopian women are said to have desired to be around brave warriors, either as relatives or through marriage. In the absence of a male heir, the familial association with a warrior brought with it benefits such as priority seating at feasts and public ceremonies, as well as the opportunity to inherit military paraphernalia and even land (Adugna 4). Even though, as previously stated, war songs in Ethiopia were composed and sung by women, they were based on such misogynistic assumptions that they may have contributed to the perception that women played no other roles in the wars. However, in the first part of the preceding passage, the narrative emphasises the version of events that have been accepted and included in a popular song in the textual actual world.

The second section of the excerpt, which begins with 'but Aster does not rise...', provides a counterpoint to the first section and introduces the reader to a more reliable version of events. The narrator, who appears to be using Hirut's memories, offers the readers her recollections of Aster's life, which parts of the song in the first section of the excerpt do not accurately capture.

By narrating actions that Aster does not take, the narrator draws our attention to how popular songs perpetuate the same nationalist version of history that may be inaccurate. The subsequent contradictory sentences also make the reader anticipate more truth about Aster, which comes in the third section, beginning with ‘No. Aster stands....’ Unlike the second part, which glosses over some details of the song, the third part adds new information about Aster’s subversion that the reader should be aware of. It fills a historical gap in the textual actual world and draws readers’ attention to similar gaps in the history of the war in actual Ethiopia.

The details of the song reflect the History of fictional Ethiopia because Aster is not a figure drawn from the actual world. Therefore, the songs, in their praise of Aster, have added fancies and, in the end, mythologise her while at the same time misrepresenting facts about her. The narrator has access to this information and therefore offers to clarify to the reader. The last two sections of the excerpt embody what Joane Lipson Freed refers to as the persuasive power of disnarration. She argues that disnarration is a way of presenting the events that comprise a story, in which the reader is given a compelling but explicitly counterfactual account. Rather than simply narrating a story, disnarration aims to create a story that the text does not voice (201). In this case, however, the narrator uses her authority as a witness to guide the reader step by step by voicing a version of the past that she explicitly persuades the reader to be the true accounts of events. The reader is strongly persuaded by her version, given that she is telling a story from a position of marginality about another figure she fought alongside but whom history has also marginalised.

So far, the discussion has established songs—as part of oral sources—as potential carriers of History. However, as I previously stated, distortions can arise from those in positions of social, economic, or political influence seeking to present a particular version of the past. It could also be the result of embellishing the songs and thus obscuring the facts. This means that songs, as oral sources, can contain some crucial historical information. In the passage below, for example, the narrator confirms that some popular songs contain accurate accounts of Aster:

Hirut understands the coincidence, sitting in the train station in Addis Ababa with the opened box on her lap, staring down at the same picture of Maria Uva. She remembers that day when Aster slipped out of Kidane’s office and brought the photo of that woman to the kitchen and said to the cook: We women won’t sit by while they march into our homes. This part, at least, the songs have gotten right. (63)

The words ‘she remembers’ and the last sentence in this excerpt are different types of disnarration from the previous one. In this instance, disnarration interrupts the ongoing narration to fact-check and account for events narrated as the accurate version rather than dismissing them as false. By juxtaposing Hirut’s present moment with a past event she witnessed, the reader is persuaded by the authority of her accounts, given that she knows the people in the songs. In the last sentence in the above excerpt, Hirut points out the partial nature of historical narratives. The statement fact-checks the songs and their representations of the past. It underscores the importance of disnarration and counterfactuals as critical tools for interrogating History and giving voice to stories that the nationalist versions could have silenced.

The second use of songs in the narrative is the inclusion of sections labelled ‘choruses,’ which reveal the fallibility of nationalist histories and the most notable instances of how disnarration is used to regulate the speed of narration. The disnarrated, according to Prince, can be used as a “rhythmic instrument by regularly slowing down narrative speed: it is clear that reference to nonevents or hypothetical events plays a role similar or equivalent to that of descriptive or commentarial information” (300). The text’s choruses are strategically placed to interrupt the narration of specific scenes, allowing the narrator to speak directly to the reader about the past. The scenes are referred to as ‘choruses’ because they are carried out by a group of women who appear to conceal their true feelings about patriarchy. They read like unofficial conversations between the women about their pasts and current situations. The following is a section of the first chorus:

We see the young Aster. We see the way she creeps up the stairs with a chorus of women ululating at her back. She is gripping the railing for strength, dragging her leaden body over the steps. Her childish heart, wild with fear, shivers visibly in her chest. We can hear the men laugh in the hall below.... She is just a girl, so when they tell her, Go on, Aster, and walk to your new husband, what can Aster do but walk?... There is this: her mother told her when it was time, she would know what to do. But there is also this: the cook told her when it was time, there was nothing she could do. Take it, the cook said. Take whatever comes and wake up in the morning and live. (Mengiste, *The Shadow King* 46–53)

The above chorus depicts Aster as a young bride on the first night of her arranged and forced marriage to Kidane. It intersects the narration of a scene where Aster physically punishes Hirut for stealing items from her house while she (Hirut) searches for her Wujigra. Aster is torn between the words of her mother and the cook's. On the one hand, her mother's advice gives her options and allows her to respond to the situation with her instincts. On the other hand, the cook restricts her options to obeying her husband and concentrating solely on survival. The women in the above chorus appear to cheer on this patriarchal practice by singing and urging the young and fearful Aster to marry Kidane.

The marriage of Aster and Kidane as a contracted marriage alliance is for the convenience of the men, Haile Selassie, and Kidane's family. Like the Emperor's daughter, who is married off in a similar arrangement, Aster is a pawn in the nation's patriarchal power games, which she does not seem to have a way out of. On the one hand, her mother's advice that she will know what to do when the time comes suggests that she is putting a romantic gloss on marriage, which she persuades Aster to embrace. But it also means that she hopes Aster will be strategic in her subservience and know what to do at a certain time in their marriage. On the other hand, the cook's advice is based on the reality that social norms compel the women in the textual actual world to accept everything that comes to them. This is what most of the women in the chorus, who seem to have accepted their situation, also encourage and expect Aster to do—to survive and not fight back. In this case, Aster must accept the marriage, but her desire to murder Kidane is revealed to the reader in the chorus when she says she will break parts of his body “with the sword as soon as she gets a chance” (53). The statement thus guides how the reader interacts with the section of the main narrative interrupted by the chorus. The words, “but there is also this” (53), disnarrate her thoughts of murdering Kidane. Even though they come before she mulls over killing him, they are reminders that she has no choice but to conform with the patriarchal demands of marrying an influential soldier against her will for the sake of the nation.

A second chorus interjects the narration in a scene where Kidane is organising troops for war. However, he is confronted with rebellion within his camp, first by a bolder Aster who has found a new sense of purpose and has resolved not to follow patriarchal expectations of women on the battlefield. Second, a group of women walks out because they see the roles they are expected to play as enslaving, such as cooking and caring for the injured. The chorus builds on the first, breaking the flow of narration to reveal more about Aster and the cook's friendship,

as well as Aster's quiet and observant demeanour. The following passage is a section of the chorus:

They dragged the cook by the hair down the dirt road. This is all she will let us say: that they dragged her by the hair while the young Aster sobbed on her knees and begged her father to stop, it's not her fault, it was my idea. We can add this: that the cook was dragged by her hair down the road in the night because she listened to a young girl's desperation, she understood it, she knew what it meant to be taken from home and bought to a family and made to live there.... [S]he knows after this night, this girl and she will never speak of this foolish hope they once shared, that they will be ashamed of it, because that hope is now lying in the middle of a lost road, battered beyond recognition. And she knows, too, that after this, they will be bound together by that shame, held in a pact so strong that no man will ever be able to break it.... This is the other truth about that night they tried to run away: Aster could hear the cook crying out beneath the blows.... She wanted to understand the breaking point of a strong woman's will. She wanted to learn what it took to splinter a woman's pride with one's own hands. She wanted to calculate the price of rebellion. (Mengiste, *The Shadow King* 98–99)

The chorus disnarrates the story that the cook wanted to tell about the night she attempted to help Aster escape her marriage. The words, 'this is all she will let us say', allude to a pact between Aster and the women regarding the information they can divulge. The words, 'we can add this' and 'this is the other truth', suggest that the choruses are spaces where the women share their personal stories. Therefore, even though they have a pact, they carefully choose when and what to share with everyone else. There is a significant degree of certainty that some information is still withheld from the reader by the end of the chorus. In this chorus, Aster has resolved to observe and learn how to rebel against the masculine forces and the consequences that must be expected. It is no coincidence that the chorus comes in the middle of a scene in which she has defied Kidane's orders and actively organises women to play critical roles on the battlefield. The interjection implies that Aster's forced marriage to Kidane and her experiences have been her training in rebellion. Drawing the reader's attention to this aspect of Aster's past life suggests her calculated passivity with the battlefield increasingly becoming her space to exercise subversion.

A third chorus disrupts the scene where Aster and Kidane are negotiating how the women can contribute to the war. While Aster wants the women to fight, Kidane insists that they perform the roles perceived to be for women: supply food, attend to the wounded, and bury the dead. Aster's defiance has grown, and the chorus depicts her as commanding a sizeable following from the women in the camp:

[T]he women wait for a whisper that carries a gust of wind: We are more than this. We are more than this. They watch as their Aster, splendid in that cape, points down toward the cloud and signals: Wait, sisters, wait and listen. (Mengiste, *The Shadow King* 123)

From the above passage, the docile women in Kidane's camp who had joined the battlefield as part of their men's domestic entourage realise that they can do more than what the men prescribe for them. Aster seizes the opportunity to mobilise them to do more during the war and challenge the societal norms that dictate how they should contribute to building the nation. The three choruses reveal a pattern in Aster's development as a character from a timid and fearful bride to a relentless and influential mobiliser on the battlefield. The bravery and the leadership that she provides to women appear to affect Hirut.

The next chorus happens after Hirut has recovered her Wujigra—the rifle she inherited from her father—from Dawit, who is dying after suffering an accident from mishandling the rifle. In this instance, the narrator takes the reader through Hirut's mind as she tries to fight off Kidane, who has been sexually assaulting her. Her experience is juxtaposed with Aster's when she was a young bride to Kidane and underwent a similar ordeal. The chorus depicts everything Hirut sees as she walks out of Kidane's hut but then disnarrates what she sees, suggesting that she will only remember the rape ordeal: "Aster, draped in a blanket waiting for her husband, her face hidden in folds. Seifu and Aklilu, in their shamma, waiting obediently for their commander. She will not remember them" (139). In this instance, disnarration foregrounds Hirut's rage. The narrator draws our attention to other events in the scene but chooses what stays in Hirut's memory—the violence of the rape ordeal that Aster has also gone through, which is why the two women develop a camaraderie. Aster warns her later that whatever she is going through is natural and that her rebellion will not stop Kidane, but this is more to express her support to Hirut than to admonish her. The fact that this chorus disrupts the scene where Hirut recovers her rifle suggests the beginning of her regaining her lost agency, which is linked to the weapon.

Hirut's growth and quest for her own liberation are further revealed in the next chorus. There is a conversation in her mind with one voice suggesting that Kidane's actions are the natural order between male and female soldiers. Another voice urges her to get up and fight: "daughter, you who think you are helpless and alone in your distress, stand in the fields and fight. Beg no more for mercy" (185). From this point, Hirut has a new resolve and a sense of purpose and openly defies Kidane's instructions. In her mind, she feels that she has become the soldier that she had always hoped she would be, even though she cannot put her thoughts to action. In this chorus, she lets Kidane know she will kill him: "remember this and know why I killed you" (190). Disnarration, in this instance, is used as a form of foreshadowing, providing the reader with hints of how Hirut's discontent with Kidane is likely to unfold.

The choruses that come after Aster and Hirut are arrested by the Italian soldiers are different from the previous ones I have discussed. The previous choruses focus on how women are victimised on the battlefield and in the camps, with Hirut and Aster bearing the heaviest brunt. The subsequent choruses show a different kind of camaraderie not only between Hirut and Aster but also with the rest of the women on the battlefield. Below is one of the choruses where women sing in support of Aster and Hirut:

Sing, daughters, of one woman and one thousand, of those multitudes who rushed like wind to free a country from poisonous beasts. Sing, children, of those who came before you, of those who laid the path on which you tread toward warmer suns. Sing, men, of valiant Aster and furious Hirut and their blinding light across a shadowed land.... (Mengiste, *The Shadow King* 310)

The chorus in the above passage reads like a song constructed long after the battle but comes in the middle of a scene where the Ethiopian soldiers have just attacked the Italian camp. For Hirut, charging in the direction of fire is one way of dying while fighting for her freedom and nation. The same can be said of Aster, who leads the charge when Kidane and the male soldiers retreat to safety. The chorus, in this instance, narrates an episode of war by pointing out the exact moment when women were involved. Also worth noting is that the chorus comes when Hirut and Aster are held prisoners by the Italian troops, where they finally get a chance to empathise with one another and openly express their camaraderie.



In the textual actual world, the most significant moment in the war for the Ethiopians is also revealed through a chorus when Fifi—an Ethiopian spy posing as a sex worker—signals to the Ethiopian soldiers the right time to attack the Italian troops. As Colonel Fucelli sleeps in her arms, she slips out of the tent, awakens the cook, and sends out a message to Kidane. The scene suggests that women, using their perceived vulnerability, masterminded the Italian soldiers' defeat by delivering them into the hands of the less equipped and overpowered Ethiopian soldiers in the textual actual world. The chorus that reveals these events interrupts the scenes where the male leaders of both the Ethiopian and the Italian sides are making plans to attack. The women's intervention, therefore, comes as a surprise to both sides. The chorus contests the accounts of the actual war that reduce women's contributions to singing and caring for the injured men while presenting Haile Selassie's ingenuity and invincibility as the reason the Italian troops lost.

As the discussion so far has shown, the choruses disnarrate aspects of the narrative and contest the linearity of the nation's history. This is in line with Prince's argument that disnarration "provides one of the important means for emphasising tellability: this narrative is worth narrating because *it* could have been otherwise, because *it* usually is otherwise, because *it* was not otherwise" (302 emphasis in original). Mengiste captures this in her use of songs in the narrative by negating what is considered fact or explaining specific events. Thus, by drawing our attention to what is thought to have taken place and what happened, the reader is given insights into how the women who took part in the war remember the events and are also left with multiple versions of the past. The placement of the choruses in between the main scenes of the narrative indicates the narrator's access to multiple sources of information about the past that they use to fact-check actual history or events in the textual actual world.

Most choruses are presented as events in specific spaces where the women share knowledge about their situation. These spaces provide personal histories that may not have been recorded but are nonetheless essential sources of information on key events from the past, especially during wartime. Disnarration's ability to unpack the multiplicity and the nuances of the past in these spaces makes it a critical device in interrogating the truth and rendering an all-rounded representation of the past. Its evocation of absences or unnarrated presences enriches and undermines the main narrative in the novel and the narrative of Ethiopian nationalist history that Mengiste uses as the starting point.

## Images, Memories and the Counterfactuals

I have mentioned in the previous sections that *The Shadow King* was inspired by photographs of Ethiopian women that Mengiste came across in Italy while doing archival work for the novel. She has noted that her initial intention was to fictionalise Ethiopia's victory as told in official history. However, the research and the photos she came across introduced her to the possibility that women could have also been frontline fighters (Mengiste, "In Conversation" n.p). The Italian soldiers who took the photos during the war used them for various purposes. They also determined which images to archive and how they wanted to interpret them. The Italian historian David Forgacs tells us that photos taken during the Italo-Ethiopian war were used alongside Italian songs to fetishize the bodies of Ethiopian women. This convinced more young Italian men to join the war to conquer the country and its women. He postulates that:

They [the photographs] served as proofs and mementos that the people in them and the photographer had actually been there. It was in photographs, and not in songs or cartoons, that colonial fantasies could find ontological anchorage in a face, a body, an event, a landscape. And yet the photographs taken by the colonisers also served another purpose...to provide them with signs of their own power and reinforce their perception of the colony's subalternity... The principal function of the photographic image in the colonies was not to record information about reality but to use the anchorage of the real to strengthen the fantasy of possession and the idea of control. (78)

In other words, photography was one of the crucial tools the colonialists used to create a different kind of memory of their subjects and thus a History. The photographer's role is considered as important as those of the soldiers on the battlefield because the photos are taken at deliberately chosen moments during the war to transmit evidence of conquest and control. This is at play in the novel with Ettore, the Italian photographer, considered by the leader of the Italian troops as doing "something else" (215). During the actual war, Marcus Banks and Richard Vokes tell us that photos of Ethiopians being executed were meant to send a message across the world that Italy had broken Ethiopia's resistance. They add that photos of execution and nude women were placed on postcards and sold in the Euro-American markets (344).

Photographs can initiate counterfactuality because they are frozen moments in time that can suggest multiple possibilities when viewed later. A single photo can elicit multiple imaginations around the place, time, and why the photo was taken. This is reflected by the American philosopher Judith Butler's assertion that a photograph "is a structuring scene of interpretation" (67) that can potentially challenge both the viewer and the photographer. Therefore, the reader's understanding of photos or their ability to unsettle their (reader's) social and political consciousness is informed by the contexts in which they are interpreted. All these suggest that one photo tells different stories, which is why a single meaning cannot be adequate for an image. This ambiguity is put more succinctly by the British art critic John Berger who avers that the true meaning of photography is found between the poles of absence and presence to which different photos are able to draw the viewer's attention in varying degrees (180). The ability of a photograph to enable counterfactuality lies in the binaries of absence and presence, what different viewers see at different moments and how they perceive the images. A photograph makes possible "what is shown [to invoke] what is not shown" (Berger 181), which is its most significant potential in a counterfactual retelling of History.

Therefore, the ambiguity of photographs makes it possible to reappropriate them as Mengiste does. While photos are central to the narration in *The Shadow King*, there are only two actual photos inserted in the novel, and these are not within the narrative but are part of the peritexts. Within the narrative, Mengiste chooses to describe the photos instead of inserting them, which I read as a deliberate decision to render a counterfactual captioning. She relies on the power of photography to communicate violence when assessing the Italo-Ethiopian war. She does this by shifting the meanings of the photos from the story of the triumph of colonial invasion—documents of atrocity—to another story of those captured in the photographs. She re-enacts the stories of the women (the personal) beyond how they have been portrayed by the archives (the political) that have held them for years. Given the multiplicities of meanings attached to one photo, the descriptions seem to focus on particular messages the reader should pay attention to. By describing the photos, the narrative puts the subjects in motion and gives them life, thereby rendering a counterfactual reading of the histories of the war.

The photos of Ethiopians from the war that Italy still keeps in its archive consist of memories of a past that they want to keep in the dark, as critic Emma Frances Bond argues. She reads Mengiste's use of the photos as a way of second-generation diasporic Ethiopians interrogating the relationship between Italy's role in the war and its present-day attitude towards African

immigrants and black Italians (6). While the photos are residues of a shared legacy, describing and recontextualising them is essential in unpacking the stories of brutality behind the photos. Mengiste acts as a medium between the Italian past and present Ethiopia, placing photography as a testimony that the war was not a masculine story.

During the war, photography was also used by the Ethiopian soldiers to show defiance in the face of the Italian invasion. In his review of *The Shadow King*, Colin Grant notes an instance when the real world Haile Selassie took a photo with one foot on an unexploded bomb left by Italian troops after raiding his headquarters (para.3). Such photos were to be sent out to Ethiopians to inspire hope despite being overpowered by the Italian troops. Such defiance is depicted in one of the photos in the text described as: “A young man, furious and proud, uncombed hair blowing freely in the wind. Sharp cheekbones, a slender chin, narrow eyes, unafraid to glare at the photographer. A finger pointed, an accusation, an eternal damning” (282). Mengiste creates a context before and after the photo is taken depicting Ethiopian spies who would rather die than divulge information about the next moves the Ethiopian soldiers were about to make. The description above captures the image of the spy after he is tortured and killed with his eyes still looking at Ettore.

By creating contexts to explain the photos, Mengiste performs the history of the war, exposing the marginalised stories from the battlefield. The new contexts that the descriptions provide also explain the processes of taking the photos and their purpose in the battlefield and presently in the Italian archive from which they are retrieved. bell hooks sees photography as key in decolonisation, given its ability to reconnect the present and the past. She argues that finding new ways to interpret images from the colonial periods offers the colonised a way to reclaim and connect “to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonial eye” (64). This introduction of multiple narratives from a single photograph and using it for multiple purposes beyond the original intended meaning foregrounds photography as central to the counterfactual mode as far as contesting the linearity of History is concerned.

Fictionally describing the real photos instead of inserting them in the text is also Mengiste’s way of wresting them from the misrepresentations by the powerful and reconfiguring the ordinary women’s narratives. This is an act that permits a holistic reading of the histories of everyone involved in the production of a single snapshot. She goes beyond the portrayal of women during the war as objects of the male gaze and fantasies by creating contexts that

explain how the women found themselves in the photos and reimagines the motives of those behind the cameras. The narrative, therefore, recovers the details of the relationships between the subjects and the photographers. What happens to the women before and after the photographs were taken is a counterfactual wondering that informs the entire narrative and the whole idea of the ‘Shadow King’. For instance, one of the photos describes ‘the cook’ as follows:

The cook: a stout figure in a long abesha chemise bent over a large cooking pot. In her right hand is a stirring spoon. In her left she grasps the edge of the pot, tilts it slightly toward her bent legs.... She squints against the harsh sun and her neck angles as if she means to get away from the photographer’s gaze. She grips her spoon too low on the handle and it is this that hints to Hirut the true extent of her turmoil as the camera points her way. (Mengiste, *The Shadow King* 92)

The photo described above is captioned by Ettore as ‘Abyssinian slave’, which is used to explain the context in which the photo was possibly taken. Her recollections suggest that early during the war, male Ethiopian soldiers also took photos of Ethiopian women and exchanged them with the Italians. This is demonstrated by Hirut’s explanation that Ettore could not have got an opportunity to take the photo without getting killed. Having been with ‘the cook’, she interprets the photo differently suggesting that even though she seems afraid of the male gaze around her, it is only a matter of time before she resists. This is realised later in the narrative when she leaves Kidane’s camp and chooses to work as a spy in the Italian soldiers’ camp.

Hirut provides a similar reinterpretation of another photo in which she and Aster “[are] pressed against the barbed wire” (424), Hirut only reveals when she is about to deliver the box to Ettore that, at the time the photo was taken, she had decided that she would kill him. She only lets go of this desire after handing the box to Ettore and forgiving him. Hirut’s interpretation of the photo 41 years later reveals that she and Aster had their own plans to escape from the camp and organise an attack.

Therefore, as the narrative describes the photos, it also offers counter-captions to the original captions. For instance, in one of the photos carried by an Italian newspaper, the caption reports how Italian troops took over one of the Ethiopian cities “without a single fired bullet” (86). However, within the same description of the photo, the narrator offers a different version saying: “this is the way it has been written, so this is the way it has been remembered. But what

Hirut knows...” (87). Hirut offers factual recollections of what happened in every photo she looks at, which conflicts with the captions. The contradictions between Hirut’s memories and the captions in the photos are Mengiste’s way of drawing our attention to how the archive chooses what and whom to remember, and how every photograph’s interpretation is both an act of remembrance and forgetting.

The third part of the novel labelled ‘The Returns’ begins with a description of five photos and an ‘album of the dead’, signed by the commander of the Italian troops and Ettore. The description of each photo tells of the maiming the Ethiopians had to endure before they were killed by the Italian troops (279–81). While the ‘album of the dead’ in the text is a collection of Italian troops’ memories of their conquest of Ethiopia, for the reader, it remembers an atrocious past that present Italy has not addressed. This is brought out more clearly through Ettore, described as an ‘archivist of atrocities’ who now seeks to atone his and Italy’s roles in the war before he leaves Ethiopia. He exemplifies the reparative nature of counterfactual history, consistent with Gallagher’s assertion that counterfactuals can be valuable tools for social scientists and humanists in assessing and addressing historical injustices against marginalised groups (1). During the war, Ettore’s role was to “capture what cannot be spoken, to manifest virtually a world both trapped in darkness and defined by it” (76). He is a co-narrator in the novel because the archive of photographs in his box, some of which are described in the narrative, includes his personal stories of the war as the person behind the camera and acting from a position of power. When he is visited by a former soldier, Hailu, who believes that people like Ettore have taken too much from a country for which they have not bled, the latter can only offer him some memories of the war:

Would you like to take some photographs I shot of the Simien Mountains? Of some of you? You might recognise some of the *arbegnorch*. I have them... Please let me give you something. They’re all here, some of my photos from those days.... (409-10 emphasis in original)

While he understands the mixed emotions that the photographs evoke in Ethiopians who participated in the war, such as Hailu and Hirut, Ettore also sees them as a way of apologising and redressing the past in the only way he knows how to. Ettore recognises that the meanings of the photos in his possession have shifted and hopes to use the new meanings they now carry to confront and atone for Italy’s past. This shows how time works in the counterfactual mode to open up images for different interpretations, prompting key perpetrators of atrocities to

recognise their guilt. The narrator says of the disorganised nature of the photographs in his studio:

He has come to understand that it is impossible to connect what happened to what will. What he knows is this: there is no past, there is no ‘what happened,’ there is only the moment that unfolds into the next. (410)

This statement directly challenges Ethiopia’s nationalist history’s dominance as the narration of what happened. It is a reimagining of the past that challenges History’s authoritative command of events. The inability to connect what happened with what will happen suggests an element of speculation to historical counterfactuals, disrupting history’s singularity by instilling the possibility of multiple versions that carry various facts of the past. Images invoke time and memory and thus open up history and even the historiographic process. By taking the photos from the public archives and reworking their meanings within private contexts, the narrative uses them to access aspects of women’s histories during the war.

### **Counterfactuals and Trauma: Narrating Power and Powerlessness in *The Orchard of Lost Souls***

*The Orchard of Lost Souls* is set in 1988 in Hargeisa, the northern part of Somalia, when the military regime is celebrating its eighteenth anniversary. The celebrations coincide with the rising voices of dissent that will eventually culminate in a coup that deposes the regime. Like Mengiste in the preceding section, Mohamed uses an actual historical event in Somalia as the story’s starting point. Whereas in *The Shadow King*, counterfactuals are created by the author, here counterfactuals are simulated in the minds of female characters who are victims of the Somali war. My argument in this section leans on the psychological theorisation of counterfactual thinking. It focuses on how these simulated counterfactuals are coping mechanisms for the characters and represent a layer of the history of the Somali war where women were involved in diverse ways. This interrogation of counterfactuals is consistent with psychologist Tim Dalgleish’s definition of counterfactuals as the “interrogation of memory to generate alternate outcomes to past events—to think about what might or might not have been” as a method of dealing with trauma (1215). Therefore, counterfactual thoughts are evaluative comparisons between the present and the past as a reference point. An individual chooses to alter or mutate some facts to see the specific alternatives that could have resulted from the alteration (Epstude and Roese 168).

*The Orchard of Lost Souls* undermines Somali nationalist histories by representing the traumatic experiences of the female characters and the alternative scenarios they simulate as coping strategies. Somalia historian Mohamed Ingiriis contends that Somalia's history, especially after Siad Barre's rule, has been written by non-Somali academics and historians. He argues that these versions of history were based on unreliable sources and therefore focused on the clan tensions and politics that led to the disintegration of the Somalia nation-state (352). As a result, what was recorded as Somalia's history were contested memories of the various clans. Ingiriis further posits that the danger of such a partial recording of the history of the war is that "victory and victimacy are constantly invoked in one setting over another without considering or contextualising the other" in both oral and academic discourses (353). This complicates the telling of such histories even further considering that war is perceived to be a male arena in which men perpetrate violence against the enemy and the women who fight alongside them.

Men also assume the roles of writing the histories of such wars, thereby rendering a potentially partial account that sidelines the participation of women in war or its impact on their lives. Historians Chris Coulter et al. contend that "the representation of a propensity for conflict and aggression as something inherently male is also an effective way to conceal how women are affected by, and more importantly, actively participate in violent conflicts and war" (7). This statement suggests that history either reduces women's stories to victimhood or deletes them entirely by focusing on men's excesses and exploits. Despite being on the frontlines of the independence movement and even the ascension of Siad Barre to power, Somali women have been pushed out of national politics and misrepresented by history. Somalia scholar Safia Aidid writes that even though Barre's regime gave women some opportunities, it oversaw repression and violence that negatively impacted women (117).

Mohamed uses fiction to represent this repression and violence, with the counterfactuals helping the reader contextualise every incident. She accomplishes this by avoiding Somalia's clan politics and instead narrating the country through the eyes of three categories of women as they relate to war and deal with the traumas that come with it. The decision to use these women's experiences reflects Carol Cohn's argument that:

The diversity of women's experiences of and relations to war is due to both diversity among women and diversity among wars. 'Women' of course, are not a monolithic group, but instead, individuals whose identities, options, and



experiences are shaped by factors including their age, economic class, race, tribe, caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, physical ability, culture, geographic location, state citizenship and national identity, and their positioning in both local and global economic processes. (2)

Mohamed's choice of characters in the novel reflects these differences and that each woman makes unique decisions during times of conflict that shape her life. The story revolves around three female protagonists: Deqo, a nine-year-old orphan and a refugee; Kawsar, a wealthy widow in her fifties; and Filsan, a young military officer in her late twenties. The book is divided into three sections. The first part introduces the three women in an unnamed stadium during the military regime's eighteenth anniversary of taking power. It begins with Kawsar and her neighbours preparing to go to the stadium in response to announcements by the Guddi (the regime's neighbourhood watch consisting of women) about how and when they should attend the celebrations. Deqo is a member of a children's dance group from the camp that is gearing up to participate in the festivities in exchange for a new pair of shoes. This is a special day for her because she also gets to leave the camp. However, things do not go as she had hoped at the stadium, as she becomes tense and forgets her dance moves. The Guddi takes her off the line to be punished, but Kawsar, seeing the Guddi surrounding the little girl, steps in to save her. Deqo manages to flee, but Kawsar is apprehended and taken to jail, where Filsan, who is in charge of three Guddi units, interrogates her.

The second part of the story focuses on the three women's individual lives as the revolution against the military regime gains momentum. Deqo ends up living in a roadside ditch after escaping the Guddi's punishment and is eventually taken in by Nasra, a sex worker who lives in a slum area of town. When Nasra moves and leaves the house to her, Deqo flees and returns to the ditch because inheriting Nasra's house also means she has to inherit her clients. Kawsar is bedridden after the encounter with Filsan, and her story is primarily based on her recollections of the past and her loss. She was once married to a police officer and buried all of her children in her compound, known as the orchard of lost souls. Her reflections also highlight the differences between the regime's rise to power and its current state. Filsan strives for a life of her own. She is not considered a soldier in the military until she murders three elders with a rifle she did not intend to fire. The military issues a statement claiming that she confronted the insurgents and killed three of them in a shootout.

The narration of the individual lives of the three protagonists reveals the types of traumas they experience and how they attempt to cope with them. They all simulate alternate scenarios that could have altered their lives. According to social psychologists Christopher Davis and Darrin Lehman, when people experience a negative event, they undo it by imagining other counterfactual alternatives. They also contend that the images that people construct for themselves as counterfactuals significantly affect their reactions to negative events (355). Undoing the simulated counterfactuals is what in literary analysis has been referred to as disnarrating the negative events from the mind of a trauma victim. In the text, the attempts by the protagonists to resolve their counterfactuals come in the third section, where the three of them come together by chance. Deqo, looking for a way out of an affluent but deserted area of the city, enters Kawsar's orchard to pick its fruits. She finds the older woman and decides to repay her by caring for her before the soldiers discover her. Filsan, who is fleeing her army duties, is rescued by Deqo, who leads her pursuers astray and takes her to Kawsar's house. Despite the tension between Filsan and Kawsar, the two women agree to leave the area for safety, with Deqo leading them to the refugee camp where she had previously lived.

### **‘Mothers of the Revolution’: Counterfactuals, Regret, and History**

In an interview with Magnus Taylor, Mohamed notes that *The Orchard of Lost Souls* deliberately ignores the political players and focuses on the lives of ordinary people caught in the middle of a conflict. She contends that “despite the suffering that hits when the war breaks out, they [the victims] are still pretending as far as they can that their lives will be the same as they expected them to be” (para.3). The only part of the story that offers a glimpse of war is towards the end of the narrative, where Filsan is coming to terms with her roles in the war. The book portrays women as both victims and perpetrators of wartime crimes, highlighting how they are impacted differently depending on their relationship to power. Their counterfactual thoughts reflect this relationship either as nostalgia, the present moment of the text, or something aspirational or speculated. Psychologists Thope Hoppen and Nexhmedin Morina observe that downward counterfactuals occur when an individual simulates an alternative scenario perceiving how actual events “could have turned out less favourably”, whereas upward counterfactuals occur when the imagined alternative is more favourable than reality (409). This is an interesting engagement with the counterfactuals, different from what happens in *The Shadow King*. While both use disnarration to assess the traumatic and emotional impact of war in Ethiopia and Somalia, disnarration in *The Orchard of Lost Souls* allows the characters

to construct upward and downward counterfactuals based on their personal experiences of the war.

*The Orchard of Lost Souls* opens with a group of women named “mothers of the revolution” for their contribution to fighting for independence and bringing the current regime to power. Based on their appellation, they were previously the “symbolic bearers of the nation”, but the regime for which they fought has denied them “any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 354). Therefore, they are excluded from the national politics as key players and are only called upon during the celebrations to show the world that the regime has the support of the women:

The mothers of the revolution have been called from their kitchens, from their chores, to show foreign dignitaries how loved the regime is, how grateful they are for the milk and peace it has brought them. It needs women to make it seem human. (7)

‘Mothers of the revolution’ reflects a domestic genealogy that, McClintock has argued, is one of the symbols that have been used to conceptualise the nation. She argues that this transfers the gendered family hierarchies (where men are the perceived leaders followed by women and children) to the nation, which then considers the social differences as natural facts (357). The eighteenth anniversary of the regime that the mothers of revolution are forced to attend by the Guddi is a sharp contrast to Independence Day celebrations as per Kawsar’s recollections. For her, the anniversary event is like a “bad husband reminding his unhappy wife of the good times they once shared while knowing they would never return” (13). During the Independence Day celebrations, women had taken to the streets themselves and made sacrifices “in the name of the flag” (13). Kawsar reminisces how she lost a golden earring that her husband had paid for as part of her dowry, and how it did not matter then because it was considered a “gift to the nation” (13).

Unlike the present celebrations, the Independence Day celebrations “changed the women of Hargeisa; that they never returned to the modest, quiet lives they had known” (13). Thus, the ‘mothers of the revolution’ are disillusioned with the regime for failing to recognise them as significant contributors to the nation’s independence and unity and taking away their freedom and the people they love. Contrary to the ‘mothers of the revolution’ who fought for the country’s independence, the Guddi is a product of the nationalist masculine desire to enforce a

unified identity in this textual world Somalia. Their role is to ensure that women and children do not express any rebellion against the regime.

The regime's excesses and the losses it has caused the 'mothers of revolution' are revealed more clearly through the upward and downward counterfactual thoughts simulated by Kawsar. She believes that if she had taken certain actions, she would not have undergone the kind of loss and trauma she is experiencing. She blames her role in fighting for the independence of the Somali nation, seeing it as the source of her misfortunes. She has lost her husband, who served as a police officer for the regime, as well as all her children who are buried in her 'orchard of lost souls.' As literary scholar Nick Tembo has succinctly argued, the metaphor of the orchard captures Kawsar's trauma and desolation and represents a Somali nation that has been betrayed, exploited, and violated by the regime that once inspired hope (5).

In the stadium scene where Kawsar is holding a child belonging to one of the 'mothers of revolution', she reminisces about her daughter, Hodan, whose death she blames on the police. As one of the 'mothers of revolution', she feels guilty about her role and imagines that her daughter would still be alive if the regime had not come to power. This is consistent with Hilary Dannenberg's assertion that upward counterfactuals are, in most cases, associated with regret while downward counterfactuals are associated with satisfaction (120). In other words, in upward counterfactuals, the failure to take some actions leads to self-implicating counterfactuals, which elicit guilt and self-blame for the individual (Davis and Lehman 364). In downward counterfactuals, an individual is satisfied that they did not act in a certain way and thus avoided a negative outcome.

In her upward counterfactual thinking, Kawsar disnarrates what happened to her and imagines alternative positive events where the child she is holding is her daughter Hodan who has been given a new lease on life. The circumstances around Hodan's death are revealed later in the story, with Hodan suffering a heinous sexual assault while in police custody with other schoolchildren after demonstrating against the regime. Kawsar self-implicates and regrets not having intervened when her daughter stopped attending school because of the trauma, which ultimately led to her committing suicide. The trauma of loss and the self-implicating counterfactuals Kawsar simulates determine how she relates to the regime and the people around her. She constructs alternative positive outcomes for her daughter and imagines what would have caused those specific outcomes. She blames her revolutionary spirit, which she believes her daughter inherited, thus joining other students to protest the regime's excesses.

Kawsar also implicates her daughter, imagining that “things would have been different if Hodan had been a more aggressive child, one who could turn her anger and pain outwards towards others” (180). However, Kawsar’s assumption that such a personality would have had a better way of handling trauma is disproved when she meets her tormentor, Filsan, who turns her trauma outwards towards Kawsar while she is in the police cells.

The other ‘mothers of revolution’ surround Kawsar as support providers, helping to disnarrate the self-implicating counterfactuals she simulates while at the same time simulating more alternative scenarios. For instance, Dahabo tells her that “you have to stop blaming yourself.... No one can derail a person from their fate. She was loved more than any child I know, including my own” (125). By attributing Hodan’s death to an unseen hand of a supernatural force, Dahabo suggests that even without the regime’s brutalities or Kawsar’s assumed inactions, Hodan would still have died on that day. Belief in superstitions and supernatural forces are thus presented as critical ways of helping trauma victims like Kawsar heal by attempting to take away the self-blame and self-implicating counterfactuals. However, Kawsar is reluctant to accept her daughter’s death as an unavoidable fate and further invokes superstitions where she is still at the centre of her death and the other losses she has suffered at the regime’s hands. For instance, she recalls touching the body of a dead police officer before she got married and links this to her many misfortunes. She is convinced that touching that first body has led to her having to touch more dead bodies since, which has brought her bad luck and many losses (140). The simulated scenario suggests that since coming to power, the regime has had an uncontrollable appetite for blood, meaning that Kawsar could not have avoided touching the dead bodies because most of them were of her relatives.

The actions that Kawsar takes at the stadium result from the desire to undo the upward counterfactuals that she simulates—the belief that she could have done something to prevent her daughter’s death. When she sees the nine-year-old Deqo arrested by the Guddi, she knows what the regime can do to anyone regardless of age and thus responds by saving Deqo from what happened to her daughter, Hodan, who was also nine years old at the time of her death. Therefore, her decision to put her life in danger by confronting the Guddi results from a fearlessness borne out of regret and the desire to undo her self-implicating counterfactuals and avoid another regret. In her mind, she wonders: “what more can they hold to ransom when they have taken away her only child? It is fear that makes the soldiers brave, that emboldens the police to loot, that gives life to that old man in Mogadishu” (20). Though the statement is

revealed in Kawsar's mind, it is emblematic of what is happening in the entire fictional Somali nation, which has since had enough of the regime leading to rebellions around the country.

Kawsar's decision to confront the Guddi lands her in trouble as she is arrested and taken to jail, where she is beaten and her back broken, further adding to her trauma. The 'mothers of revolution' simulate downward counterfactuals, which depict the dangers of confronting the agents of the regime and the different outcomes that could have resulted from Kawsar's actions. Dahabo, for instance, asks, "...and what did you think you were doing anyway? That kind of rushing away from us in the stadium? Did you go insane?" (125). These are rhetorical questions meant to admonish Kawsar for confronting the regime because she could have been beaten to death as one of the rebels. The questions also emphasise the potential dangers of responding to such self-implicating counterfactuals.

Being locked up in jail after her arrest at the stadium fills Kawsar with mixed feelings. While her freedom is taken away, the feeling that she is walking the same path as her dead daughter and finding out what broke her and caused her death resolves some of the questions she has lived with all along. She imagines that she is sitting in the same corner that her daughter sat in when she was in the cells and attempts to simulate the events that could have ensued before and after Hodan's first night in the cells. Through the young and dejected sex workers with whom she is locked up in the cells, Kawsar understands how the police violate the young women and how her daughter was possibly harshly treated by the police and the women in the cells. The events she simulates while in the cells shed light on what could have broken her daughter, which she had never understood before.

Mohamed thus uses Kawsar to depict how the political situation in Somalia at the beginning of the 1987 coup burdened women. Besides the trauma inflicted on them by the regime by locking them up in cells, Kawsar claims that "women are running their families because the streets have been emptied of men; those not working abroad are in prison or have been grabbed off the street and conscripted into the army" (149). She then counterfactually imagines that even if her husband, Farah, had been alive, he "would be like the others—hiding in his house, meek, prematurely wizened..." (150). The two statements indicate how the new nation's quest for unity and continuity forcefully conscripts men into the army while the reluctant are locked up or their means of survival destroyed. This, however, affects both men and women in different ways, as Kawsar's experience shows. She imagines that if her husband had been alive, the regime and even those around her would treat her differently. This is first and foremost because

her late husband was a police officer, and secondly because, as a widow, she is deemed as lacking a patriarchal anchor and thus considered powerless. This is depicted in the scene where she argues with her maid, Nurto, telling her that “you wouldn’t dare speak to me like that if my husband was around” (158). For Kawsar, therefore, besides being a disillusioned ‘mother of the revolution’ who has lost every member of her family and has her back broken by its agents, she has to live with society’s condescending attitude towards widows. Therefore, upward and downward counterfactuals by Kawsar emphasise the past experiences of the ‘mothers of the revolution’ against the realities they are currently facing. Comparing what exists and what might have been, or what once existed but is now lost, invites us to pay attention to the alternative story of Somalian women that Mohamed is telling.

### **Filsan as a Female Agent of Masculine Military Violence**

Filsan is portrayed as a complex character; she is a young female officer unsure of her place in her family and the army. At home, she is raised by a military father who has trained her only to see the good in the military regime and to aspire to serve the nation as a devoted soldier in the future. Her childhood experience is full of loneliness, which makes it challenging for her to socialise even as an adult. The decision to join the army and volunteer to move from the capital Mogadishu to Hargeisa is out of her conviction that she is “more committed to the revolution than her male counterparts” (10). In the military, she is experiencing what Mattocks et al. refer to as Military Sexual Trauma—“sexual assault harassment or sexual coercion tied to opportunities for promotion” (540). From her upbringing and what she has seen in the military, Filsan knows the military is a patriarchal environment that demands that she behaves in a masculine way to get what she wants.

However, her male colleagues treat her as a lesser soldier because she is a woman and assign her roles that do not involve weapons because they believe she is incapable of handling them. She is dissatisfied with her roles in the army and longs to be noticed as a soldier. This is why in the stadium scene where she is introduced, she imagines a different world for herself whereby she is sitting at the podium with the governor, General Haaruun, “not as his companion, but as his successor, waving down to her subjects” (9). She imagines that given General Haaruun’s power—masculine, violent, and brutish—she will be recognised by her fellow soldiers and even the public.

Even without fulfilling her imagined scenarios, Filsan believes that meeting General Haaruun would help her out of her present situation in the army. It, however, turns out that, like her male colleagues, Haaruun also does not see her as a soldier. He notices her and knows her father but expects sexual favours from her. Her trauma is exacerbated at the hotel where she accompanies the General:

None of the other guests approaches her. Maybe if she weren't in uniform, they would think she was worth speaking to, but now they just crane their necks to look around her. There are soldiers outside she can speak to, but then General Haaruun might forget about her, jump into his car and drive away into the half-light of the late afternoon. (34)

From the above passage, Filsan realises that even as a soldier accompanying the region's most powerful man, she is still invisible in the eyes of ordinary citizens and imagines that perhaps being a civilian would get her noticed. Military sexual trauma is depicted more succinctly when they leave the hotel with the General, who throws her out of his car after she refuses his sexual advances. As a female soldier, Filsan feels that she can channel her rage and anger to other vulnerable citizens. From the humiliating scene above, Filsan goes to the police station to interrogate Kawsar, who refuses to respond to her questions satisfactorily. Alongside the hotel scene where she is not noticed even by the members of the public, Kawsar's responses make her realise that "for some reason, people feel they don't need to respect her" (44). To cultivate respect, she feels she must unleash force on Kawsar, breaking her back in the process.

Filsan thus constructs upward counterfactuals that involve utilising the masculine brutality that the military affords her in order to be recognised both in the military and by ordinary citizens like Kawsar. This upward counterfactual is realised after she shoots dead three elders who do not heed her instructions to stop and keep a safe distance. She holds the rifle that shoots the elders but is unsure if she is the one who has pulled the trigger. Even though the scene leaves her with the trauma that her actions could have been prevented, the incident also comes with the recognition that she has always wanted as a soldier. She is finally recognised by her male colleagues and gets a rare opportunity to tell the story of her 'encounter with rebels' on national radio. After the incident, she is coached in the techniques of military violence, where she is given an alternative story to tell. While the elders were innocent, the new story paints them as rebels who had attempted to attack Filsan. Having gained recognition as an agent of the



regime's violence, Filsan does not construct any further self-implicating counterfactuals that would elicit any sense of guilt.

Her decision to desert the military can be attributed to two reasons; first, her colleague, whom she recently has fallen in love with, gets killed when the rebels attack. Secondly, the traumatic events that she encounters as a female soldier kill her sense of humanity. She becomes unable to empathise with others even when she is complicit in their pain (Spencer 148). This is demonstrated by her indifference at the site of a group of children drained of blood to replenish dying soldiers. On her way from this scene, she walks over heaps of bodies but does not show any guilt or remorse. Instead, she is filled with "an insatiable curiosity and desire to know when and where her own death will come and what expression she will wear to meet it...she is doomed to be nothing more than one of death's handmaidens" (321). The statement exemplifies how disnarration evokes a sense of heightened speculation resulting in the character undoing their counterfactual thoughts through a belief in superstitions. In other words, in events such as that which she finds herself in, she believes she has no control of the past or the future, and that fate guides her actions. These are not self-implicating counterfactuals because she does not accept responsibility and is content to believe that fate has appointed her as an agent of violence.

The idea that she has not been in control of her actions and thus feels less culpable is reinforced in the scene where she meets Kawsar, who is one of her victims. When Filsan asks for forgiveness, the old woman's response that "only God can forgive you" (326) validates Filsan's own belief that her role in the war was fated. It could be argued that by asking Kawsar for forgiveness, she finally finds a sense of guilt for her actions as a soldier. Even as Kawsar assists her in transferring her guilt to a supernatural power beyond her control, the two women's determination to seek safety together is a step toward healing both of their traumas.

Of the three female protagonists, only the nine-year-old Deqo seems to resolve the upward counterfactuals she simulates. As a child living in a refugee camp, she has no idea of the political situation outside. From the stadium scene where she escapes the Guddi, she encounters a world the camp had insulated from her. Her new environments enable her to explore some of the thoughts she has simulated about her existence. After she escapes arrest by the Guddi at the stadium, she walks into places, and nobody seems to notice her presence. She, therefore, takes advantage of her invisibility to navigate the increasingly volatile Hargeisa. This lands her first

in jail after being arrested alongside protesting schoolchildren and later in a slum where sex workers live.

The cell is portrayed as a liberating space for her because it is here that she begins to resolve the simulated scenarios in her thoughts. She finally feels that she has an advantage over someone because the schoolchildren with whom she shares a cell have “no [idea] what the real world is like” (64). She refers to her world in terms of lack, where food and shelter are hard to come by. Therefore, she sees the soldiers and the schoolchildren fighting in the streets as living in an alternate reality that she has always wanted, but which they take for granted. Furthermore, the women-only cell is the only space she finds where she can “put shame aside for a while and flop down without worrying who might see her legs or who might grab her while she sleeps” (66). This indicates the fear of violation in the places where she has lived before, such as the camp and in the streets where the men who are supposed to protect her as a vulnerable child look for opportunities to take advantage of her sexually. Therefore, while the cells are supposed to take away her freedom, she finds a new sense of community and family that she has always wanted.

After the cells, Deqo is invited by Nasra, one of the sex workers, to live with her. Nasra and the other sex workers staying in the shacks are described as “dead souls” (76), but for Deqo, the women in the shacks help her construct her mother’s image and resolve the counterfactual thoughts she had simulated about her. For instance, having believed that her mother must have abandoned her at birth, she looks at Nasra and the other women and attempts to figure out her mother’s reasons:

If she is a whore then China must be too, so why had she kept her child? If it wasn’t necessary to abandon him, then why had her own mother abandoned her? Deqo swallows with difficulty as the notion that her mother might have kept her enters her mind. Did she see something wrong with her? Was she running away from a child whose bad luck was written across its face? (81)

In the above passage, Deqo seems convinced that her mother must have been a sex worker, but given that China, one of the sex workers, has kept her child, she realises that sex workers do not have to abandon their children. The questions she asks constitute self-implicating counterfactuals that make her the reason why her mother abandoned her. She is, however, determined to undo these counterfactuals by embracing the thought that her mother could have

been a sex worker. Therefore, for her, the “war and all the time in Hargeisa is just a complicated trial to achieve what she always wanted: a family, however makeshift” (336). Deqo’s vital role in bringing the three protagonists together in the last section of the text is an attempt to undo their counterfactuals. For Deqo, it is the need for a family; for Filsan, it is the need for acceptance, this time without using brute force to assert her authority, and for Kawsar, a new lease of life and family. The upward and downward counterfactuals evoke new forms of social and political consciousness in the female characters where they translate their regrets and negative feelings into support and camaraderie to survive the violence of the war that is raging on around them.

Thus, Mohamed uses the traumatic experiences of these three women of different ages to narrate how they are affected by war. The counterfactual thoughts they simulate as they try to cope with their traumas represent personal stories of women. These include those who fought for independence and have witnessed the deterioration of the state, like Kawsar. Then there are those born after independence who enjoyed the freedom that came with it, thus getting the chance to join the military like Filsan. Finally, the children who are victims of the regime’s failure witness war for the first time like Deqo. Their stories and reactions are based on how they are positioned in relation to social and political power. However, in the end, Mohamed suggests that during the war, even though women may have the state power to maim other vulnerable citizens, they still have to face the gendered nature of such wars. Reading the novel in terms of upward and downward counterfactual imaginings emphasises the notion of counterfactuals as disnarration (Dannenberg 119). Though Dannenberg rightly observes that these are different from historical counterfactuals because they are more personal to the characters, my discussion of the novel reveals that the characters’ responses to the effects of war offer an alternative history of Somalia that is absent or misrepresented.

My argument in this chapter has interrogated the potentials of the counterfactual framework in retelling elided or misrepresented stories of women in wartime narratives. While counterfactual fiction is considered a tool for imagining different outcomes for specific historical events, these female writers engage the counterfactuals differently. Both Mengiste and Mohamed use periods of war in Ethiopia and Somalia, respectively, as the starting points of their narration, with the male-authored versions of nationalist history as the authoritative and presumed *facts*. Mengiste and Mohamed contest the linearity of such histories by offering alternative

versions—*counterfactuals*—that foreground women’s roles and experiences during these periods that changed the two nations’ histories.

Therefore, reading the two texts as counterfactual novels enables a kind of comparison and interaction between the worlds that History chronicles and the fictional worlds of historical novels, unravelling what is real and what is not. They unsettle History by contesting the idea of fact, emphasising the notion of historical facts as not necessarily equated to the truth. In *The Shadow King*, the counterfactuals are story-based and reveal a shadow history of women that is not part of History but exists in other spaces. Counterfactuals, therefore, intervene by enabling access to these spaces, uncovering presences and absences, and rendering the silenced histories of women. *The Orchard of Lost Souls* presents character-based counterfactuals, which reveal counterfactuals as part of powerful inner narratives that either add to women’s trauma caused by war or help them escape it. In both texts, counterfactuals expose nationalist histories as incomplete, inaccurate, and lacking—a myth.

Therefore, counterfactuals’ engagement with nationalist histories is a productive way of contesting their hegemonies by imagining the hypothetical ‘what might have been’ and introducing multiple ways of reading what happened. This suggests that even though these are historical novels that engage historical facts, counterfactuality intervenes through speculation. My discussion in the next chapter engages novels that are explicitly defined as speculative fiction. Unlike the textual worlds of historical novels drawn from the real worlds, the worlds of speculative fiction may be set in worlds never seen before. Nevertheless, as my discussion will show, the contemporary African speculative fiction draws from both the real world and the unknown, thereby offering a social and political critique of the nation in different ways.

## Chapter Four

### Counterfactual Mythmaking in Contemporary African Speculative Fiction

The situation of women means that the future is more important than most people imagine. While Euro-patriarchal knowledge, which is thought that is biased both by Eurocentrism and patriarchy..., claims to know objective, “solid” truths about the world, including the future, African women ancestors would approach the future with a sensibility that also knows “poetic” truths about the world and the future.... I believe that they would say the same thing they said about African pasts: namely that society needs to be transformed; patriarchy needs to go; exploitation needs to end; the marginalisation of women must stop. (Salami 92)

In the previous chapter, I discussed how certain stories are deliberately selected by individuals with social, economic, and political power to attain dominance. I have interrogated how Mengiste and Mohamed variedly use counterfactuals to renegotiate the relations between history and fiction. Their works advance the notion that something else could have taken place beyond what is archived by nationalist histories. In the process, the two texts uncover the elided and misrepresented stories of women in real historical contexts of Ethiopia and Somalia. The present chapter discusses this dissertation’s third understanding of myth: science fiction as a form of myth(making). I use the counterfactuals in this chapter to understand how speculative fiction writers employ counterfactuals to create alternate worlds that mirror the actual world. I argue that these alternate worlds offer a richness of possibilities to interrogate the shortcomings of histories and dominant narratives in the present and to articulate a feminist vision of the future.

The framing of my argument in this chapter adds to the growing critical attention to African speculative fiction by examining the genre as a site for the experimentation of counterfactual thought (Lebow 67; Hills 437). The selected works for this chapter—Jordan Ifueko’s *Raybearer* and Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*—represent new voices in diasporic African writing that are engaging African feminist traditions in their reconceptualisations of new forms of African futurisms. As the Nigerian-Finnish scholar, Minna Salami, suggests in the epigraph, the African futures imagined by these authors advance new feminist epistemologies that do not focus entirely on the encounter of Africa with the West, but are instead rooted in Africa. Their futurisms transform and challenge conservative forms of understanding African histories where time is fragmented “into precolonial, colonial,

and postcolonial periods corresponding with the past, present, and future” (Salami 90). Salami’s standpoint resonates strongly with the words of the late Nigerian scholar, Obioma Nnaemeka, who argues that African feminist scholarship “injects issues of subjectivity and location into epistemological debates [and] seeks...to put a human face on what is called a body of knowledge” (Nnaemeka 363). Authors like Okorafor and Ifueko represent diasporic speculative fiction writers who have become key voices in African feminist studies that advance Nnaemeka’s vision of contextualising key epistemological debates. Such contextualisation is a way of giving sufficient attention to factual concerns of the African continent in general and African women in particular (Lewis 8).

The female protagonists in the texts I study in this chapter rebel against powerful patriarchal establishments in their quest for truth and a feminist future. Ifueko and Okorafor challenge the archetypal representation of women through counterfactual mythmaking. The three novels can be categorised as Young Adult Science Fiction (YASF), a sub-category of speculative fiction that has been seen as more open in imagining and dreaming up worlds for young readers where the “present [is seen] as a future history and the past as it if were an unwritten future” (Hills 440). This is consistent with Joe Sutliff Sanders’ argument that the attraction of YASF, despite the little scholarship attention it has received compared to what can be considered adult science fiction, is its fluidity when it comes to observing genre rules (Sanders 448). It, therefore, allows diasporic African women writers to advance their revisionary agenda while at the same time offering warnings to their readers on the implications certain actions may have on the future of the present world.

Richard Lebow, a political scientist, reminds us that probing causation in myth and history opens up dominant narratives by imagining how things could have turned out in other possible worlds. He adds that such worlds give us some distance from the actual world and its beliefs, a vantage point to critique the world “empirically and normatively” (67). Matt Hills, on his part, argues that counterfactuals are used differently in history and science fiction. He notes that:

Science fiction does not restrict itself to imagining different outcomes for world-historical events... [its] use of the counterfactuals is...one way in which it can destabilise ontological perspectives and compel readers to see the ‘real’ historical world in different, perhaps more critical ways. (437)

This ability of science fiction to negotiate the alternate worlds of actual world history and future possibilities lays a basis for its mythmaking potential. The worlds constructed by science fiction writers may seem far from plausible, but this is what makes them a potent space for counterfactual imagination of how the actual world would have turned out if certain things were to change. Counterfactuality in science fiction either looks backwards to the past—this is where aspects of histories of the actual world seep into the texts—or projects the future to worlds that have never been experienced but might be anticipated. For texts that need an expansion of the category of science fiction, as I have mentioned in Chapter One, the settings may also be in possible worlds that are not plausible, spaces that allow the writers to pass social and political messages. For instance, Kay Sambell observes that the YASF has seen immense growth over the years and has developed clear and identifiable concerns. She writes that:

Whether these fantasy scenarios extrapolate from current trends to take the imaginative form of [neo-traditional or hyper-technological] societies, or whether they predict the apocalyptic aftermath of nuclear aggression, the future is typically represented as a terrifying nightmare that child readers must strive to avoid at all costs. (247)

The texts I use in this chapter depict neo-traditional, hyper-technological societies and a blend of both. A neo-traditional society in speculative fiction can be described as a textual actual world whose settings bear significant resemblance to known spaces in the actual African world. It also depicts the use of some technologies that the reader can recognise from the actual world, while others may be unrecognisable. Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Ifueko's *Raybearer* fall in this category. In contrast, a hyper-technological society is one where futuristic inventions and innovations are employed to alter the actual world's realities significantly. However, in such a world, the author bases their imagination on the future possibilities of advances in science and technology in the actual world. *The Book of Phoenix* combines neo-traditional and hyper-technological societies, creating a textual universe where futuristic technologies, actual world African settings and cultures, and magical worlds interact. This kind of worldbuilding underpins the role of African speculative fiction as a critical vehicle for imagining spaces of challenging gender hierarchies where young women assume roles that are traditionally reserved for men.

My discussion in this chapter will unfold in three parts. The first part uses Ifueko's *Raybearer* to unpack how orality and the counterfactuals work in YASF to uncover stories hidden from the surface. In the second part, I look at Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* and discuss how the black female cyborg as a counterfactual figure renegotiates the cyborg archetype to reimagine African women within the framework of speculative fiction. The final part of this chapter focuses on Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* to discuss the making and unmaking of dominant texts as a counterfactual process. I argue that Okorafor utilises intertextuality in her worldbuilding, where female heroes are at the centre of fighting for a specific kind of utopia where normative gender notions are shattered.

The worldbuilding in the three texts revolves around teenage girls going against strong patriarchal figures to liberate society in general and reclaim spaces for women in particular. Moreover, in the context of my focus on counterfactual mythmaking in diasporic African women's speculative fiction, these texts are effective because they all justify why speculative fiction has been considered a new form of myth. The texts are thus unique in the sense that both writers push the boundaries of YASF to tackle the questions of diversity, identity, and female exclusion. Their worldbuilding is strategic in that even their incorporation of African myths and spiritualities is directed towards creating young female heroes who are black, strong, and also flawed.

### **“The truth will never die, as long as griots keep beating their drums”: Orality and Counterfactual Fantasy in *Raybearer***

Mythmaking, especially in the African context, revolves around storytellers using their memories and imaginations to traverse actual and alternate worlds, using their artistry to pass on certain social critiques and histories that the archive may miss. Their stories thus tend to open up the archive, not just to reveal certain ‘truths’, but also to reimagine other possibilities—what could have happened and what may happen in the future. Ifueko's *Raybearer* utilises the frame of speculative fiction to foreground the importance of oral stories and their narrators in social and political critique. It applies the premise of counterfactual history to create a possible world where there are significant alterations of facts of the textual actual world. The textual universe assumes the form of the actual world where the society is organised in favour of men. To imagine an alternate reality, counterfact, the female protagonists have to go back to oral histories of the textual actual world and sift between what is real and mythical as a way of challenging and abandoning the oppressive gender hierarchies. In other words, fact versus



counterfact is realised within the textual actual world but are allegories for how patriarchal power structures work in the constructions of myths and histories in the actual world.

Jordan Ifueko is among the latest voices in African Speculative Fiction, which is increasingly appealing to female writers as a site for mythmaking with African women at the centre. *Raybearer* (2020) is her debut novel with its sequel, *The Redeptor*, published in August 2021. The text's plot is driven by the tension between the actual world and the surreal world of the text. Ifueko's worldbuilding is fantastic, providing her with a vantage point from which she critiques the patriarchal dominance of historical records in the actual world, offering what Suvin argues is "a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action" (8). As a genre that targets young readers, YASF provides African diasporic writers like Ifueko with a platform to pass on morals and highlight adults' actions that young readers should not emulate. She specifically reaches out to young girls by dedicating the book to them with the words: "for the kid scanning fairy tales for a hero with a face like theirs. And for the girls whose stories we compressed into pities and wonders, triumphs and cautions, without asking even once for their names" (*Raybearer* i). She, therefore, uses the genre to comment on gender and race stereotypes that have been a concern for feminist science fiction for some time. She, however, stresses the need for storytelling as a way of uncovering and bringing to the surface women's histories.

The novel is a first-person narration of Tarisai, a girl born to a mysterious and absent mother only known as 'The Lady.' She sees Tarisai as a weapon to exact revenge on her brother, the emperor, for erasing her story and excommunicating her from the palace. In the first part, the reader is introduced to Tarisai's lonely childhood as she is prepared to join the prince's council of eleven children trained to take over the kingdom's reign in the future. Even though she trains as one of the prince's chosen eleven, she refuses to be anointed because she is torn between obeying her mother's wish to kill the prince and fashioning her own path. For her love for the prince (all the chosen eleven are bound by their love for the prince), she uses her supernatural abilities to erase her mother and her entire childhood from her memory.

In part two, she is confronted with the past that she had chosen to forget, with her mother reappearing and administering a drink that restores her memory. With her memory back, her mother's wish pushes her to attempt killing the prince by stabbing him. With this failed attempt, she realises the danger she poses to the prince and the need to discover her mother's story to break her curse. Part three opens with Tarisai on a quest to discover The Lady's story. Her

meeting with the fairy who fathered her uncovers her mother's past and the empire's darkest secrets. She gets a better understanding of who she is and the excesses of the kingdom that she has pledged her loyalty to as a High Lady Judge designate.

In part four, 'The Lady' is captured by the emperor's men and faces a death sentence, which the emperor orders her daughter, Tarisai, to make as her first ruling. Tarisai, on the other hand, has to read extensively on the empire's archives and the hidden histories to ensure she delivers justice not just to her mother but to the entire kingdom. The discovery of lost stories, especially of royal women deleted deliberately from the archives, helps Tarisai deliver a different ruling that celebrates the multiplicity of stories and the griots that tell them. The narrative ends with Tarisai delivering the proof that women could indeed be 'Raybearers' (emperors and empresses) by discovering the royal masks meant for the female Raybearers.

The novel focuses on the power of stories to marginalise women or reveal truths about their roles that are deliberately deleted from the archives. The world that Ifueko creates functions as an engine of counterfactuality. It is a unique world where even though the political structures are almost similar to the actual world, especially in their use of power to undermine women, Ifueko proposes a relatively simple solution to overcoming this power, which differs from the actual world. Tarisai is born with the unique ability to "see puzzles everywhere. Every person, every place [as] a series of riddles, stories within stories..." (56). By simply touching people and objects, she is able to extract their memories and secrets. She can also use her abilities to enter other characters' minds and erase or transfer images, which are then replayed as dreams. By endowing her with these powers, Ifueko's construction of Tarisai is consistent with feminist scholar and critic Marleen Barr's argument that at the centre of feminist fabulation is "how Woman finds the key to information regarding her place in patriarchy—a key to female narratives devalued by patriarchal myths about women's inferior text" (238). The ease with which Tarisai is able to access information and tip the knowledge scale against the patriarchal political structure portrays her as the key to uncovering the marginalised histories of women in the textual actual world. This allows her to seek stories that expose and stop the insidious patriarchal powers that undermine women in the text.

Tarisai's birth comes from a counterfactual wish by The Lady, one of the royal women whose stories were deleted for fear that they might threaten existing power structures. As one of her last options to get her revenge against her brother, the emperor, she offers to sire a child with a fairy spirit, imagining that their child would be endowed with more supernatural power to

confront the emperor. Her questions to the fairy demonstrate her counterfactual desires: “what if...my child was an ehru [an enslaved spirit]? What if my child was yours?” (9). This moment is crucial in the narrative because, as per The Lady’s calculations, Tarisai, the product of her union with the ehru, would be the potent weapon she needs to fight the erasure of women like herself from the empire’s history. However, this is one of the secrets that The Lady has kept from Tarisai, but which the latter uses her supernatural powers to uncover later in the text.

The narrative employs instances of negation and disnarration; for instance, Tarisai is unsure about her role when joining the prince’s council. Her mother, The Lady, invades her memories to instruct her to kill the prince, which she is hesitant to do because she wants to create her own story, not fulfil her mother’s wishes. Disnarration is best demonstrated in the scenes where she is battling her mother’s voice in her mind against her own thoughts: “*I command you to kill... kill—No. That story isn’t mine anymore [...] It is unwritten* (83 emphasis in original). The Lady’s desire is thus disnarrated by Tarisai. Disnarration is further demonstrated by the first ellipsis, which suggests that Tarisai’s thoughts intervene before her mother’s voice in her mind completes the statement. The rest of the statement is a more explicit refusal of The Lady’s desire. However, Tarisai’s desire to disnarrate her mother’s version of desires happens more strongly in the scene where she erases her childhood memories, including The Lady and her training on using her special powers. This aspect of disnarration creates an absence that forces her to find new ways of filling the new gaps in her story and refocusing her to use her powers in serving the empire’s patriarchal structures.

By Tarisai “kicking down the doors of [her] mind’s palace and setting flame to every room” (123), she not only disnarrates her childhood memory. At the narrative level, this act also discounts the story that the reader has been engaging with from the beginning. As the narrator and the protagonist, this kind of disnarration creates a gap in the story and faces the challenge of unbelievability of how the narrator remembers the first part of her story in the first place. Therefore, to recover the initially disnarrated story becomes central to the rest of the narrative. The Lady makes attempts remotely to help Tarisai recover her memory. The quote, “the truth will never die, as long as griots keep beating their drums” (142), comes from a line emblazoned on a 200-year-old talking drum she sends to Tarisai as a gift. The drum belongs to the only woman to ever sit on the throne as an empress, but whose story is dismissed in the textual actual world as a fanciful myth. Therefore, the drum, alongside Tarisai’s ability to extract its stories, is supposed to reverse the disnarrated stories and bring them back to the centre of the narrative.

The importance of the drum is foregrounded by the words of Kathleen, her childhood caregiver, who hands her the instrument: “such an artifact must contain priceless stories, and only a Hallow such as yours could retrieve them. Perhaps such stories will remind you of your own...there are those who would preserve history, instead of choosing to forget it” (142). Ifueko seems to draw from the use of talking drums in the actual world, especially by West African oral historians (griots). The Senegalese musician and composer Seckou Keita notes that griots are “[trained to excel as orators, lyricists and musicians [and keep] records of all the births, deaths, marriages through the generations of the village or family” (para.1). They mainly use the drum as a storytelling tool to emphasise key points in their narration and provide intermissions. Their messages are thus straightforward since both the storyteller and the audience have to understand the different coded messages in the beats.

In contrast, the drum in the textual actual world is depicted as a repository of memories, which can be extracted through a complex system of meaning. For instance, the beats that the drum produces, “bong, gun, godo godo gun”, which translate to “it was always inside” (379), are instructions that whoever is able to understand the message should cut the drum open to access the royal masks meant for women. These are pieces of history that have remained hidden for 200 years in the textual actual world. According to the myths governing this fictional society, one can be an emperor or an empress when they have these masks. To maintain a patriarchal political structure, the emperors have constructed myths that the Storyteller, the deity, made only the emperors’ and the princes’ masks, and thus, only men can rule.

The discovery of the drum and the masks are major turning points in the narrative. First, they become tools for narrating the disnarrated past because they help restore Tarisai’s erased memories. Secondly, they bring back the hidden history of the only woman to have been an empress. The significance of this discovery as a counterfactual moment is summarised by Tarisai’s comments that: “the masks roared with the memories of beating hearts, the strident voices of Kunleo girls, of Raybearers who refused to be silenced” (405). The fact that the memories coming from the drum contradict the empire’s ‘official histories’ of royal women prompts Tarisai to begin the quest of unravelling the unanswered questions from the past. Hers and her mother’s contradictory desires at this point become a united quest for a complete representation of the past by rejecting and exposing the male-sanctioned forms of cultural memory. To maintain the empire’s stability, griots are targeted, and their stories censored to align with the official narratives from the emperor’s council. This is seen in the scene where a royal decree is issued to gag the griots:

By decree of His Anointed Honor, High Judge Thaddace of Mewe, in the name of His Imperial Highness Emperor Olugbade of Oluwan, descendant of Enoba the Perfect: All griot drums, stories, and history scrolls of individual realms must be surrendered to the emperor's forces. In exchange, citizens will receive gifts: new drums, scrolls, and songs, compliments of the crown. These gifts will reflect the new stories of our beloved empire. The story of assimilation, of realms growing together instead of apart. Families are encouraged to forgo realm names for their children, choosing instead names that reflect virtues of a united Aritsar. While this request is not mandatory, children with empire names will be rewarded with additional food for their families, as well as clothing cut from Empire Cloth: the new favored style of the capital. The emperor thanks his subjects for ushering in this new era of unity and peace. Residences will be searched, and griots will be watched. Failure to comply will be met with discipline. (Ifueko, *Raybearer* 178)

Here, Ifueko refocuses the concerns of YASF to explore how patriarchy and imperialism work together in determining which stories attain a hegemonic status and which ones are deliberately obscured. The emperor's decree is a dramatisation of Selbin's idea of the creation of History where the powerful take it to be at their discretion to explain "how it is that we have arrived at the place we find ourselves and why things are and how they are and should be" (49). Ifueko thus draws our attention to the power of stories as a tool used differently by the rulers and the citizens (or the dispossessed); the powerful use stories to create myths that justify their stay in control while the dispossessed rely on memory to produce stories that remind them of the truths that are not covered by historical facts. These alternative stories thus contest the myths of the powerful, imagining counterfactual visions where such oppressive structures are dismantled.

Ifueko juxtaposes how the emperor's council, consisting of elders, and the prince's council, consisting of teenagers, relate with the truth, historical facts, and the power of stories. Elders are considered a repository of wisdom and knowledge in the actual world. For instance, in most African communities, whether as individuals or working within institutions such as 'Councils of Elders', they are respected given their ability to pass on their knowledge of the past and cultural values to new generations. While they hold a similar position in the textual actual world, they are also depicted as perpetuating linear narratives that justify the subjugation of women. Tarisai considers their role in determining gender roles in the textual actual world as

“a dumb tradition” (121), which she promises to change when she becomes the High Lady Judge.

On the one hand, members of the emperor’s council prefer peace and stability over justice. As shown in the above excerpt, the tone and the exaggeration of their extended titles dramatise the power and authority that the patriarchal structure accords them in their roles. On the other hand, the prince’s council is depicted as more liberal and recognises the centrality of different stories in achieving justice. Nevertheless, their grooming as the next generation of the empire’s leadership requires that they learn the system’s oppressive tendencies and adopt the same extended titles as the elders’.

The clash between the two generations of leadership is dramatised in the scene where Tarisai, performing her first role as the High Lady Judge Apparent, goes against the emperor’s choice of a case to rule on and instead overturns the emperor’s decree in the previous excerpt that silences griots and their stories. Her ruling, shown below, restores the marginalised voices and figures that the emperor and his council wish to remain untold:

Peace comes when stories are celebrated, not erased. Henceforth, the Unity Edict shall be revoked...and replaced with the Imperial Griot Games. Every twentieth moon, all realms must send their best griot to perform the stories of their people at the capital. The most talented griot shall be rewarded from the treasury, and all performers shall receive imperial titles, for their stories bring great honour to the empire. Let the record be sealed. My First Ruling is passed.  
(Ifueko, *Raybearer* 401)

The contrasting tone between the previous excerpt containing the emperor’s decree and Tarisai’s ruling above is not only a direct challenge of authority. It also suggests that while both councils recognise stories as collectively owned, the emperor’s council sees them as threats to stability while the prince’s council sees their value as a way of creating an elaborate image of the past. Tarisai’s ruling above speaks to the functions of counterfactuals in narrating the past in the sense that with the introduction of a multiplicity of stories, whether they are historical facts, myths, or lies, they create a sense of comparison, which contests the linearity of ‘official stories.’ Interestingly, Tarisai’s position is protected by a masculine tradition, which dictates that whatever ruling is made by the holder (depicted as always held by a man) is not contestable even by the emperor. Even the songs made in honour of her brave act refer to her using the pronoun ‘his’, demonstrating that the members of the textual actual world do not

expect a woman to hold that position. Therefore, by taking advantage of such a tradition to reverse the emperor's decree, she does what feminist scholar Barr describes as "narrative replenishment" (246), where women, in their quest to reinterpret stories written and elevated to dominance by men, take on masculine rituals and re-enacting them to achieve more balanced and representational gender relations.

In her quest to confront the male-sanctioned historiography, Tarisai joins Kirah, the designated griot in the prince's council who is tasked with censoring the historical records in the imperial library. They instead put into dialogue, the archive, and the oral stories, and in the process, discovering that poetry by women in the empire has always been hidden even though women poets always existed (218). By uncovering poems that celebrate daily realities of life as well as the history of the empire, they replenish the archive as a space for celebrating women's stories and understanding their perspectives on cultural practices that have been sanctioned by patriarchy. They also discover how the archive deliberately creates new stories about women who led the empire in the past, such as Aiyetoro, whose history reads: "journals—her letters, the books her council wrote about her—were lost in a fire" (221).

Another important figure in the narrative that underpins Ifueko's invocation of the significance of the power of stories in mythmaking and counterfactual thought is the supreme deity conveniently named 'Am the Storyteller.' The Storyteller is depicted as genderless, subverting the normative gender binaries of male and female. More intriguing is its spare memory reservoir, a crevice "confined to rock" (433). Even though the crevice is on a mountain within the same realm in the textual universe, it is a sub-world that can only be accessed by the royals who have unique qualities to fathom its stories. As an omnipresent witness to the stories of the empire, the crevice contains alternative histories of the empire, which contradict the politically sanctioned myths and histories that structure the empire. This is why to understand how empresses were erased from the empire's history, Tarisai has to access the rock and extract its memories. Her discovery details the process of the deletion of women's stories and the creation of new myths that are meant to sustain a patriarchal power structure. The Storyteller thus serves the function of linking temporalities within the textual actual world, with its sub-world, the crevice, acting as a space for fact-checking human-authored narratives.

Despite standing as a pillar of memory and truth, the desire for power from the men leads to the formulation of myths around the Storyteller that feed the gender hierarchies in the fictional empire. For instance, to keep women's stories silent, priests and priestesses are required to

“adopt a Book of Common Song” (181), which is a uniform prayer chant written under the watchful eyes of the emperor and his council. Just like the Great Book in *Who Fears Death*, which I discuss later in this chapter, the ‘Book of Common Song’ is written with the intent to control who, what and how people can remember the past. The passage below captures an instance when such myths are invoked to justify the exclusion of women from leadership:

[W]hat about when the Raybearer’s a girl?’ The priest inhaled, summoning patience, then smiled. ‘There are no female Raybearers, child. Am [the Storyteller] has always chosen a man. That does not mean, of course, that female council members have no value. After all, you might *bear* a Raybearer... The empire would be forever in your debt. (53 emphasis in original)

Tarisai’s question in the above excerpt is counterfactual because it does not seek an answer and instead imagines a scenario where the Raybearer is a woman. Her imagination of such a possibility calls into question who the daughters of Raybearers are and where they always end up. This leads her to the discovery that her own mother, ‘The Lady’, was excommunicated from the empire as per the royal customs and because she had powers that are seen as a threat to the throne: “Kunleo daughters—and Rayless sons—are born without fanfare, sent away after weaning, adopted by nobles who raise them away from court” (168).

From the foregoing discussion, counterfactuals in *Raybearer* serve an allegorical function. By rendering a narrative that critiques gender stereotypes that work against women and exclude them from leadership in the textual actual, the reader is invited to take a step back from the strangeness of the text and the powers that Ifueko endows her protagonist to confront the social and political realities of the actual world. Whereas counterfactuals in historical fiction work within the constraints of historical facts, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, this novel demonstrates that the limits of counterfactual speculation can be stretched. Specifically, imagining a scenario where humans have the ability to extract accurate, but elided or misrepresented histories foregrounds the genre as a potent ground for offering a different kind of alternate history that makes little or no reference at all to the history of the actual world.



## **The Black Female Cyborg as a Counterfactual Figure in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix***

Nnedi Okorafor's oeuvre explores alternative ways of reimagining African women by making elaborate proclamations of feminism through strong female characters who take on powerful patriarchal forces to envision an alternate world where oppressive structures are contested and dismantled. Some of her other works include *The Akata Series* (2018), *The Binti Trilogy* (2018), *Lagoon* (2014), *Zahra the Windseeker* (2005), *The Shadow Speaker* (2007), *Broken Places and Outer Spaces* (2019), and *Ikenga* (2020). My focus in this section of the chapter concurs with Joshua Yu Burnett's standpoint that Okorafor's oeuvre "shows postcolonial speculative fiction's potential as a site for counterhegemonic discourse, as a space for examining possibilities that are not available within mainstream realist literature [and is] qualified to intervene as a politically transformative force within postcolonial studies" (134-5). Okorafor's use of strong, black female protagonists brings out the interconnection between African feminisms and the advancements in science and technology. More importantly, this interconnection challenges the genre of science fiction and how it has always been applied to the African context.

The interconnectedness of the multiple worlds in her texts, especially *The Book of Phoenix* and *Who Fears Death*, speaks to Dannenberg's notion of speculative fiction as a "semirealist ontological hierarchy", which she identifies as one of the ways of counterfactual mapping in literary texts (121). The two texts are set in the future and depict a multiplicity of alternate worlds that draw from, alter and challenge the past, which is the actual world of the reader (Dannenberg 128). This allows her to unpack and turn common gender and racial stereotypes on their heads. In her essay, "Organic Fantasy", she explains that her homeland, Nigeria, greatly influences her writing: "to set foot in Nigeria is to be filled with another 10 novels and 50 short stories. And these aren't 'normal' [stories]" (Okorafor, "Organic" 276). This explains her style in the two texts I discuss in this chapter where the alternative worlds' close association with the actual world signal the much-needed urgency to address the present challenges. She presents young, powerful, female figures as liberators from some of the crises and catastrophes bedeviling the world at the moment and likely to continue in the future.

*The Book of Phoenix* is set in an African desert two hundred years after an apocalypse and presents a blend of the tropes of science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism, which make up what Okorafor has conceptualised as Africanfuturism. Sunuteel leaves his wife, Hussaina, to

take a routine pilgrimage to the desert to hunt new stories that Hussaina loves. Sunuteel comes across a rare cave of computers from the old days when the Okeke (humankind) angered the Goddess Ani with their technology. He finds an audio file with ‘memory extracts’ from a controversial female cyborg, Phoenix, containing the previous world’s history before its apocalyptic destruction. Phoenix narrates her escape from her creators and how she staged a revolution against the futuristic American company, LifeGen, which is only known to its victims as ‘Big Eye’ or ‘Red Eye.’ The company conducts non-consensual experiments with humans of African descent to create cyborgs such as Phoenix as part of their research on organ transplants and biological weapons designed to benefit only the elite. Her liberatory journey takes her across the ocean to Africa to return a stolen alien seed before masterminding destruction as a way of giving the world a fresh start. However, Sunuteel distorts this story, creating a narrative that justifies slavery and violence against dark-skinned people. In the text’s sequel, *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu comes forward to rewrite this narrative—the Great Book—aiming to dismantle the oppressive structures it imposes in the textual actual world.

*The Book of Phoenix* is an important addition to the growing body of speculative fiction that is African-centred. Matthew Omelsky has argued that the cyborg in African science fiction is increasingly used to “undermine organic notions of femininity, the female body, and masculinist power structures” (9). This means that the genre has become an important space for theorising African feminisms, with the cyborg figure being an important disruptor of normative societal stereotypes. Belinda Du Plooy expresses a similar sentiment, observing that using the cyborg to discuss the realities of African women challenges us to consider new ways for African women to “rewrite stories, displace hierarchical dualism and challenge naturalised identities” (135). Okorafor constructs the character of Phoenix as a hybrid and transnational black female cyborg who is more conscious of her humanity and African roots, making her a perfect tool for challenging racial and gender hierarchies.

Phoenix is introduced when she is two years old. Given the radical biotechnological transformations that her body has been put through, her physique is of a forty-year-old. She, however, seems to have other abilities that her creators had not envisioned; while they hope she can use these powers to advance their interests, Phoenix turns out to be more human than the machine she is made to be. She is a radical cyborg that seeks to destroy the system that created her to give the world a fresh start. Before I look in more detail at the specific characteristics of the fictional cyborg, Phoenix, it is important to consider some of the aspects of the history of cyborgs in the actual world. The term cyborg first appeared in a 1960 article

by American scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, who postulated that creating “a self-regulating man-machine system” (27) might help humans cope in unfamiliar surroundings, particularly in space. They argued that the cyborg would make things easier for humans, “leaving them free to explore, to create, to think, and to feel” (27). This suggests that the cyborg and the human would be working as two separate units and could easily be detached if need be.

From the 1960s, genetic modifications have developed significantly, with the cyborg becoming more advanced than before. The cyborg figure is no longer predominated by the “brain-in-metal-body motif” (Laughlin 147) but is now used to embody culture and represent the complexity of human consciousness in the advent of technological advancements. The theorisations and representations of the cyborg in popular culture have also advanced, with the cyborg becoming an established literary archetype. In her 1981 essay, Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (306). She considers the hybridity of the cyborg as a space for possibilities that can be used to transcend normative human and gender categorisations, which are products of patriarchy. She argues that: “cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” and the tools are “often stories, retold stories that reverse and displace hierarchies” (306). Haraway argues for the use of the cyborg as a metaphor that represents both utopian and dystopian worlds where normative binaries of race and gender are transformed. Her conceptualisation of the cyborg resonates with Birte Christ’s notion of counterfactual feminism, which also envisions an alternate world where such essentialist binaries are shattered (192).

Okorafor’s depiction of Phoenix as a cyborg, however, blurs the differences between the human and the machine, creating a connection that seems to contradict Haraway’s counterfactual vision. By modelling Phoenix as a gendered machine conscious of her subjectivities as a black woman, Okorafor creates a cyborg that reimagines social realities in more radical yet humane ways. Nevertheless, this modelling of the cyborg also seems to utilise Haraway’s speculation that “who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival” (309). Haraway suggests that the cyborg myth and the cyborg figure are spaces of experimentation with genetic engineering and popular culture having different aims. For the former, the goal resonates more with the dreams of Clynes and Kline to make things easier for humans. For popular culture, however, the cyborg is used as a mythical figure that readers can identify with

and articulates their day to day social and political concerns. In both cases, the cyborg embodies transcendence and possibilities that keep changing as technology changes.

Whereas both Haraway and Okorafor imagine the cyborgs as tools of resistance and subversion and imagine figures that use their makers' tools to turn things around, Okorafor's experimentation with the figure of the cyborg stretches its limits even further. Her modelling of cyborgs seems closer to what literary critic Petros Panaou introduces as "post post-human" (72), which he explains as a cyborg that retains her humanness. Panaou argues that with the increasing control over the evolution process by humans, recent YASF are increasingly posing existential questions such as: "what are we doing, why are we doing it, and is this the outcome we want?" (69). Okorafor's imagination of the cyborg resonates with Panaou's, demonstrating the kind of evolution of the figure in popular culture where they (cyborgs) are no longer referred to as 'it' but are assigned human pronouns and are able to challenge the ethical concerns of the technological advancements that make them possible. Phoenix, for instance, can read 700,000 books in a year and has free access to any information she needs. The engineers at 'LifeGen'—the American corporation behind her 'creation'—believe that this access to information works in their favour as part of their experimentations. Phoenix, however, gets to read around the world histories from centuries ago and "[listens] to audios of the spiritual tellings of long-dead African and Native American shamans, sorcerers and wizards" (10). Her access to knowledge and ability to use it to her advantage opens up her human consciousness and subjectivity as a woman. She is able to interrogate her identity beyond Tower 7 and recognises herself as an embodiment of contradictions, describing herself in the negative as an "abomination". Nevertheless, she embraces her double otherness first as "a cataclysm spurred by weapon engineers and scientists" (173) and secondly as a black woman who identifies more with goddess Ani—an Igbo deity believed to be the creator of all forms of life. Despite the technological modifications on her body, she sees herself as "natural [and] a child of the Author of All Things" (178). As a deity's daughter, she believes her purpose is to right the wrongs of genetic manipulation of bodies and give the world a fresh start. She says:

When Ani was rested to produce sunshine, she turned over and was horrified by what she saw. She reared up, tall and impossible, furious. Then she reached into the stars and pulled a sun to the land. I am that sun. I am Ani's soldier. I do her will. Ani has asked me to wipe the slate clean. (Okorafor, *The Book of Phoenix* 259)

As Ani's soldier and a designated weapon by the genetic engineers, Phoenix positions herself as a complex cyborg. She seems to be created from an imagination of the counterfactual (what if) questions one can ask based on Haraway's comment at the end of her essay that she "would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (329). What if a cyborg and a goddess (or at least her agent) were to be in one black female body? What would she achieve that a cyborg or goddess alone cannot? As a product of multiple worlds, Phoenix is thus endowed with more powers that allow her to do things that are implausible in the actual world, even from the perspective of technology. For instance, she can fly across the ocean without drowning, burn to ashes and gather her remains back to life like the archetypal Phoenix. Okorafor uses the possibilities created by the actual world technologies and artificial intelligence and the alternate worlds of myths to create a character that pushes the limits of what a cyborg can do. While the ability to traverse different worlds provides her with the agency to dismantle all forms of normative categorisations, she is limited by constraints linked to the actual world, such as manipulating stories to suit certain needs.

As the only witness to everything that happens after she sets the entire world ablaze, Phoenix's choice of African storytelling techniques to narrate the histories of the previous world underpins the place of African storytelling as a historiographic source. The figure of a female cyborg orally narrating the past that she single-handedly erased from existence is a powerful counterfactual scene given that the patriarchal order that had influenced most narratives and from which stories of origin are told is destroyed. Telling her story in her voice is part of the fresh start that she ushers in even though she does it through a 'portable'—a digital device used for communication in the futuristic textual world. Okorafor brings together oral tradition and twenty-first-century technologies and exposes the challenges of relying on the digital as a repository for oral traditions. She reinforces the idea of oral traditions as surviving because they are known and shared by the whole community. In contrast, recorded stories are vulnerable to distortion because the technology can become obsolete with time, and those who control the technology can deliberately alter what is recorded.

Phoenix's new originary tale for the imagined alternate world exposes the old world as riddled with a consumerist patriarchal culture where African bodies are treated as products to be exploited. Literary scholar Lizelle Bisschoff has argued that cyborg figures like Phoenix can help "us to reconsider existence and identity in radically different ways by creating new origin myths and new African feminist epistemologies" (622). The narrative, however, takes this agency away from Phoenix by having Sunuteel, a man, intentionally rewrite Phoenix's story to

create what becomes the Great Book, which is essentially a patriarchal and ethnically divisive grand text. I discuss the justifications and implications of this rewriting in the next part of this chapter. She draws her radicality and subversion from the fact that she embraces the subjectivities that come with her hybrid identities and uses them to understand the world around her and how to respond to it.

Even though Phoenix finds more sense of community with normal humans while she is in Ghana and considers America as her “false home” (110), the other cyborgs believe she is more aligned to her American identity. They believe that her creators have a way of tracing her and forcing her to do their bidding, which she will eventually do. In what reads like a monologue as he waits for Phoenix to arise from one of the episodes of her death, Mmuo tries to convince her to recognise the centrality of African spiritualities in her life:

You are an American, Phoenix. So though you know Africa well, you will believe in the power of science over all that we know. But you are an African, too, so you know it in your flesh, your strange flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world. Where is it that you are returning from as I tell you my story? Is it from a test tube? Or from somewhere else? (138)

The above passage brings to our attention the evolution of the black female cyborg in representing African diasporic identities. Phoenix is reminded of how she has to strike a balance between her multiple identities and sense of home as an African born in America. Phoenix, however, seems to have a stronger sense of her African origins than other cyborgs like Mmuo can understand. From the beginning of the text, she is drawn more to African cultural practices that she even chooses to narrate her story “[using] the old African tools of story: Spoken words. They are worthier of trust and they’ll last longer” (7). Here, she poses as a griot; in the previous section, I have discussed how orality in the African context of storytelling is an essential aspect of mythmaking and counterfactuality in the diasporic African YASF.

Using characters that traverse physical and cultural boundaries is a key characteristic of diasporic African writing. Okorafor utilises the flexibility of the cyborg figure to comment on aspects of the actual world’s history. This allows her to stretch her imagination to include the plausible and the uncanny as a way of interrogating the past and projecting the future. I have mentioned that Phoenix’s most potent weapon against her creators is her ability to tip the knowledge scale against them. Through her knowledge of both actual world and textual actual

world histories, she comments on the legacies of slavery, and how she feels like the futuristic world she is created into is replaying the same. Her capture in Ghana and the forced voyage across the ocean replays the slave journeys, which is why she refuses to get onto a ship (109). Even after she chooses to fly across the sea, she fears getting closer to the surface of the water because “[it] would pull me into its great belly as it had so many other Africans on unwanted journeys” (111). In another scene that highlights the legacies of slavery and racism and their persistence into this distant future, Phoenix narrates that to her creators:

[She] wasn’t human enough to be a threat. They saw me as they saw the Africans made slaves during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade hundreds of years ago. They saw me as many Arabs saw African slaves over millennium and how some still see Africans today. (160)

By drawing our attention to such aspects of the history of the actual world, Okorafor foregrounds the fact that the legacies of colonialism always have overdetermined black bodies. Their exploitation, as the narrative suggests, has also provided breakthroughs for western biomedical research. Okorafor brings this exploitation to the fore by recasting stories such as the mythical ‘Mitochondrial Eve’ and Henrietta Lacks. Phoenix narrates that one of the ‘abominations’ created by the ‘Big Eye’ was a ten-year-old Ethiopian girl ‘adopted’ because:

They believed she was a direct descendant of ‘Mitochondrial Eve’ and thus carried the complete genetic blueprint of the entire human race. On top of this, the girl was affected by hyperthymesia, an extremely rare condition that made her remember every moment of her entire life. They gave her the code name ‘Lucy’... they made a perfect clone of her...[and] tried to make Lucy immortal by reprogramming her DNA to not age. For eleven years, Lucy remained in the body of a ten-year-old. When she was twenty-one, she escaped and threw herself from the roof of Tower 1. (116)

The ‘Mitochondrial Eve’ has been considered a myth of human ancestry and has attracted disagreements for years among molecular biologists. Some of them, like Francisco Ayala, believe that the ancestry of the modern humans can be traced to the Mitochondrial Eve (1933), while others like Roger Lewin have dismissed it as a preposterous proposition, arguing that there is no way an African female was living 200,000 years ago (26). Nevertheless, by recasting this story into the text, Okorafor suggests that the contestations around the opposing assumptions both motivate further research and thus a rush for African bodies with which to

experiment. The above passage indicates that the scientists only want to keep ‘Lucy’ alive for as long as possible to conduct experiments that would prove or disprove the ‘Mitochondrial Eve’ myth.

Unlike the ‘Mitochondrial Eve’, Henrietta Lacks, whose story is also recast in the text, was an actual figure in the actual world. Okorafor captures her identity without alteration as: “a black American woman who died during the Jim Crow era, in 1951 [and whose] cancer cells were harvested and used to advance science beyond the imaginable after scientists learned that those cells were immortal” (*The Book of Phoenix* 220). In the text, a young black woman is named HeLa—the code name given to Lacks’ immortal cells by scientists in the actual world. In a scene where Phoenix meets this character, she realises how close she has always been to the real Henrietta Lacks, whose cells she believes were used in her creation. Unlike the actual world Lacks, who had gone to the hospital for cervical cancer treatment on her own, HeLa is hunted down from India, where she is believed to be the last of the Jarawa tribe (220). However, like Lacks, her blood is harvested and sold without her consent, but in this case, only to a few wealthy individuals. She tells Phoenix that:

Men, only men are wealthy enough to buy my blood... they spent half of all they have, billions. What kind of man has billions? You know what kind? There are seven men who have injected my blood into their veins. These are the seven men whose bodies will never go through senescence. They will never die. These men who are still billionaires and garner great influence. In a matter of years, the world will be theirs. Because of me. BECAUSE OF ME! (Okorafor, *The Book of Phoenix* 222)

Separated by more than two hundred years, the experiences of HeLa, the character in the text, and Henrietta Lacks, the historical figure, highlight the pervasiveness of sexism and the consumerist desire to appropriate the female body. The HeLa cells for which this character is named are still in use today and have been a subject of research, which has also been highlighted in popular culture. Rebecca Skloot, an American medical journalist and researcher, has been most invested in exposing how Lacks’ cells have been used and the ethics around the research. In an article in *The New York Times* in 2000, Skloot reveals that: “Gey introduced the nation to his hopes of curing cancer while Henrietta’s body lay in the Hopkin’s morgue...and her family knew nothing of it” (Skloot, “Henrietta’s Dance,” para.5). Given that John Hopkins was one of the few hospitals that black people were allowed to go to during the Jim Crow era,



the above quote exposes how the medical facilities were more preoccupied with conducting studies on black bodies than treating their ailments. Skloot's research on Lacks and her family culminated into a full-length book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), which has since been adapted into a movie with the same name released in 2017. In both, she highlights the contributions of the HeLa Cells to biomedical research and stresses the ethical implications of a lack of consent from patients and their families.

However, Vanessa Gamble, a scholar of medical humanities and bioethics, accuses Skloot of missing "the broad context of the history of race and American medicine" (1) by focusing on the stereotypical angle of exploitation and poverty of black families. She urges a reading of Lacks' story as "a history of agency and accomplishment" (1) for black women and the advancement of medicine. Gamble's concerns here are addressed in a scene in the 2017 movie where Lack's daughter, Deborah (played by Oprah Winfrey), and her brother visit a laboratory at John Hopkins and are marvelled by the possibilities that their mother gave to the world of medicine; their only concern is that they knew nothing of what their mother's cells were doing to the world. This scene reflects Skloot's 2013 article in *The New York Times*, where she stresses Lacks' family's pride in the HeLa cells but does not want them to remain anonymous (para. 13). Published in 2015, two years after scientists sequenced the genome of the HeLa cells (Skloot para. 13), Okorafor's textual actual world comments on the pervasiveness of racism and exploitation of human bodies embedded in capitalist health care systems in the actual world. The American corporation behind the transhumanist project in the text is ironically named 'LifeGen', which can be read as a short form for 'Life Generation.' While it seeks to improve the human species, the company mines organs from African bodies like HeLa and Lucy above to fulfil the desire of a few billionaires to live long and control the world. One of the most feared implications of such projects is the insatiable appetite by their owners to create a minority group of superior humans who control a majority of perceived inferior humans (Panaou 70). Technology is facilitating humans to transcend the limits of their bodies at all costs, with corporations such as 'LifeGen' making resources available for such efforts.

In the novel, the fact that cyborgs created from the altered bodies are all named 'speciMen' suggests the masculine nature of the project and its motives. Even though the speciMen are tools of patriarchal capitalism, their actions to revolt against their creators reflect Bisschoff's assertion that: "part of the enigma and allure of the female cyborg...lies in the paradox of it being both a symbol of patriarchal control—often effectively materially and imaginatively created by male desire—and a signifier of freedom from patriarchal constraints" (613).

Haraway accounts for this paradox in her theorisation of the cyborg as a subversive figure. As with Phoenix, Okorafor radically changes the image of the cyborg to suit African realities. While Phoenix may seem to serve the patriarchal control of her creators, she is strategic and uses her master's tools to dismantle the master's house, to borrow Audre Lorde's famous words (112).

By conceptualising an informed resistance against the American capitalist forces through a two-year-old accelerated African woman, *The Book of Phoenix* dramatises a new kind of liberating potential of the cyborg in twenty-first-century YASF. I call it informed resistance because Phoenix does not act as a faulty machine might do to its operator. She garners enough knowledge, which she uses to stage her fight. When she realises that she cannot reach the seven billionaires behind blood harvesting from speciMen like HeLa, she scorches the entire world, believing that the men will die. She states that "wherever those seven men lived. Let them die. Let everything die" (260). Her statement suggests that the alternate world she imagines would be free from consumerist greed and exploitation as in the present textual actual world. However, even though the American imperial power is no longer a threat in the new world, which is the textual actual world of Okorafor's sequel *Who Fears Death*, new forms of oppression still emerge.

The nature of the counterfactuals is that while they provide spaces to imagine other possibilities and expand how readers can think about their realities, there is always the question of plausibility with every counterfactual thought. When Phoenix scorches the entire world, one man remains alive, Saeed, with whom she fell in love in their early days in Tower 7. A cyborg himself who is possibly injected with HeLa's blood, he becomes a central figure in the new world where Okorafor's next book, *Who Fears Death*, is set. Towards the end of *The Book of Phoenix*, Sola, a character who claims to traverse past, present, and the future, says Sunuteel's book of Phoenix is faulty because he was too afraid to look for "The Seed [Saeed] for real answers...instead, he chose to write fiction" (273). As I discuss in the next section, the worldbuilding in the text is nowhere near the utopia that Phoenix hopes for. As a counterfactual device, Phoenix's character resonates with the reader more than it does with the world of the text. This is because the reader who inhabits the actual world is able to make comparisons with the textual actual world to tease out what is plausible and what is not. This is made possible by the novel's use of counterfactuals, which rely on relativity to make sense of the actual world.

### **(Un)making the Great Book: Disruption and Intertextuality in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death***

This section of the chapter examines how Okorafor's mythopoesis employs counterfactuals to provide a balance between realism and fantasy. Realism here is variedly defined as the actual world and the textual actual worlds of previous works of fiction. My argument in this section takes a keen interest in how intertextuality, as a counterfactual device, allows writers to construct new worlds, and modify or utilise the worlds that other texts have constructed, be they fictional or nonfictional.

*Who Fears Death* revolves around the rewriting of the Great Book, which is itself a rewriting of Phoenix's story in *The Book of Phoenix* that is now used as a dominant religious text. It is a collection of mythologies crafted from Sunuteel's misinterpretations, as discussed in the previous section, and justifies the status quo, ranging from gender to racial dominance. For instance, it decrees the domination of the Okekes by the Nurus. Sunuteel creates these two categories to represent black and white racial dichotomies, respectively. However, in Phoenix's version, the Okeke refers to everyone. The members of the fictional kingdom are made to believe that the book was written by the agents of a Goddess Ani and thus cannot be questioned. It is, however, prophesied that a Nuru man would come to rewrite the Great Book. Onyesonwu, born out of rape to an Okeke woman, turns out to be the one chosen for the task and has to contend with various societal barriers before she can get to the Great Book.

Okorafor notes on the back matter of *Who Fears Death* that the story was inspired by real events that occurred in the Darfur region of Sudan and were reported by Emily Wax for *The Washington Post* in 2004 (420). In the report, Wax details how an Arab militia in Sudan, Janjaweed, orchestrated an ethnic cleansing against black Africans where men were butchered while women were raped to bring forth "Arab babies to take the land" (Wax para. 6). In these pogroms, women bore the heaviest brunt because those who survived the killings not only watched their fathers, husbands, and sons killed but were also forced to bring forth children who were not welcome to either the black or the Arab communities. Okorafor's counterfactual worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death* uses these events as part of future history and appears to interrogate their causes, issuing a warning to her readers in the process. Dannenberg avers that "future history involves a single linear extrapolation from the real-world present that creates a conjectural vision of the near future or distant future" (*Coincidence* 200). The conjectural vision does not have to provide plausible scenarios but offers a safe distance from which to

examine the present world. Furthermore, it is a vision that carries evidence that resonates with the present, thereby constituting plausible counterfactuals.

The worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death* exemplifies how Okorafor bases her creation on the plausibility of counterfactuals, with the plot seeming to direct the reader to ponder questions such as: ‘what if our interpretations of religious texts are the causes of racial and gender imbalances and tensions?’ and ‘what would happen if they were rewritten?’ The narrative attempts to address these questions by imagining the arduous task it would take to challenge a dominating patriarchal tradition that postures itself as the custodian of such texts and whose interpretation asserts itself as the ‘truth’.

Okorafor can be understood as an author whose mythopoesis involves both implicit and explicit intertextual play, which she uses to transform other texts’ actual worlds and advance counterfactual mythmaking. Intertextuality can create an emphatic effect, rendering a counterfactual (re)imagination of the worlds of other texts and the author’s actual world. *Who Fears Death* is in dialogue with other texts at various levels reflecting Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of intertextuality where she postulates that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (66 emphasis in original). This challenges the notion that a text can bear a single meaning assigned by the author and invites multiple ways of producing meaning, which serves to rid it of an authoritative interpretation. The writing process does not end at writing but is delegated to the reader whose interpretations and new meanings are part of writing. Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality hugely influenced the French theorist Roland Barthes, who writes that:

[A] text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 146)

Here, Barthes shows us how intertextuality undermines the dominance of texts and their intended meanings, thereby inviting the reader to play a role in producing meaning. This strategy performs two functions in Okorafor’s mythopoesis; first, it establishes a context from previous texts and arms the reader to understand the present text better. Secondly, it opens up spaces and multiple worlds from which to imagine other possibilities beyond what the reader knows in the present actual world and the textual actual world. This allows them to tease out

her engagement with the historical material in the actual past and the futuristic ‘past’ in the text.

The aspect of intertextuality crucial to the worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death* is the contextualisation of the Great Book, narrated in its prequel, *The Book of Phoenix* (2015). In *The Book of Phoenix*, Sunuteel, the author of what is now the Great Book, justifies his rewriting of Phoenix’s story by repeatedly quoting Barthes’ famous essay, ‘Death of the Author’, in which he argues that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (Barthes 147). The allusion to Barthes’ theories of intertextuality in suggesting the ‘origins’ of the Great Book criticises his foremost concern that meanings in texts cannot exist in isolation without the readers’ multiple interpretations. Through their worldviews and experiences, readers are actively engaged in challenging a text’s encoded meanings. Barthes likens the production of new meanings brought to a text to a revolutionary act, seeing it as “to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (147). *The Book of Phoenix* dramatises the intellectual engagements with Barthes’ theory in the scene where Sunuteel, the first person to access and listen to Phoenix’s extracted memories, is confronted by the voice of Phoenix through a ‘portable’ warning him not to distort her story:

You can rewrite a story, but once it is written, it lives. Think before you do; your story is written too and so is the map of the consequences. Ani will remember the path, even if it is full of loops and swirls. Think, old man.... You’re just a memory...you’ve been extracted. You’re nothing now. Leave my portable. (Okorafor, *The Book of Phoenix* 268)

The above exchange pits an author (Phoenix) who wants her text to retain a certain intended meaning and a reader (Sunuteel) whose reading ignores aspects of Phoenix’s story that do not conform to his expectations of what the world should look like. He, therefore, produces a new version that ensures a continuation of oppressive narratives even though they are slightly altered from what was going on in the previous world destroyed by Phoenix. Okorafor seems to suggest a complex and perhaps implausible relationship between an author and the reader. Even though the former does not have authority over their stories, they can make interventions and attempts to resist readers’ interpretations that challenge the authority of the original stories or distortions of them. This, however, fails even in the textual actual world because Sunuteel produces the Great Book, which is a transformation of Phoenix’s story.

Nevertheless, it derives its uniqueness and authority from a single interpretation that sees it as the accurate narration of the origin of things in the world of *Who Fears Death*. Even the quest to rewrite the text as prophesied is interpreted differently: the Nuru seer, Daib, sees it as a necessary restoration of the status quo. In contrast, Onyesonwu's rewriting is intended to dismantle the oppressive interpretations ascribed to the text. *Who Fears Death* is, therefore, a counterfactual rereading of *The Book of Phoenix* with Okorafor utilising the fresh start that Phoenix promises at the end of the novel as a background for her worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death*. As I have discussed in the previous section, the alternate world Phoenix hopes to create by destroying the entire textual actual world does not materialise because the world is built on stories, and her story is distorted. The intertextual resonance between the two of Okorafor's texts elevates the reader to a vantage point from which they can read how the conflicting interpretations of the Great Book are constructed.

The intertextual correspondence between *Who Fears Death* and other past fictional works reflects what Dannenberg has called "characterological counterfactuals" (121), bringing together Lewis's concepts of transworld identity and counterpart theory. Dannenberg notes that characters can be alternate versions of their counterparts in other worlds, "be it in real-world history, in another work of fiction, or in the same fiction" (121). For instance, *Who Fears Death* and Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) bear a remarkable resemblance. The plot structures of both texts focus on female figures subverting the wishes of powerful male figures who seek to retain dominance. Like Doro in *Wild Seed*, who exploits Anyanwu's powers with the hopes of siring children with special powers, Daib in *Who Fears Death* also rapes a sorceress, Najeeba, and hopes to sire a powerful sorcerer to fulfil the prophecy of rewriting the Great Book (20). Furthermore, Anyanwu resists Doro's exploitative schemes the same way Najeeba uses her mystical powers to overturn Daib's wishes by bringing forth a sorceress who goes on to rewrite the Great Book.

Another aspect of characterological counterfactuals is how Okorafor's mythopoetics appeal to the world of African mythology. Intertextuality in *Who Fears Death* is also realised through the text's references to the Igbo mythological phenomena that are embodied in the mythographic use of images from the community's spiritual cosmologies. For instance, in the narrative, Goddess Ani, the creator of all things, is the counterpart to a powerful deity in the Igbo religious cosmologies with the same name. Among the Igbo, she is believed to be in charge of the earth, morality, fertility, and creativity. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's celebrated novel, *Things Fall Apart*, presents Ani as a goddess who "played a greater part in

the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth” (26). For the Igbo and in Achebe’s fictional world, Ani plays second fiddle to Chukwu, an overarching male deity who assigns roles to other minor deities. Okorafor’s mythographic depiction of Ani in the text portrays her as the Supreme Being and the originator of everything. Achebe presents her as bearing great responsibility, and her authority is unquestionable by the fictional Umuofia society. When Okonkwo, the protagonist, breaks the traditions of the Week of Peace by hitting one of his wives, he is informed that “the earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (C. Achebe 23). Ani, in this context, is presented in a positive light; even though she is feared, the members of the textual actual world have developed myths around her that are meant to encourage hard work and good morals.

While there are similar constructions as above in Okorafor’s possible world, she also foregrounds what a deity can and cannot do for humans, thereby exposing the misunderstandings, exploitations, and even the manipulations of such figures based on the teachings of religious writings. In *Who Fears Death*, Ani is seen to have a close personal relationship with the Okeke women who routinely visit the desert to ‘hold conversations’ with her. However, Onyesonwu’s mother, Najeeba, and other women are attacked and raped while in the middle of the ‘conversation’, a moment that they consider holy. The passage below highlights the scene:

Najeeba was telling Ani how she and her husband had sat outside the night before and seen five stars fall from the sky. It’s said that the number of stars a wife and husband see fall will be the number of children they will have. She laughed to herself. She hadn’t a clue that this would be the last time she’d laugh for a very long time. (*Who Fears Death* 17-8)

The fact that the narrative further reveals that “the Goddess Ani hadn’t bothered to tell the women that they were dying” (18) suggests a betrayal by Ani and weakens the concept of the deity in the eyes of the violated women. The above scenes scandalise the Igbo conceptualisation of Ani as their moral guardian and protector of the earth. Reading the scene through a counterfactual mode allows us to interrogate what would have happened if Ani had done what the women and the community believed to be her role. Would the women have been attacked? Would Najeeba had been raped and Onyesonwu born? These questions are further explored by

Onyesonwu later in the text, where she expresses disappointment in the deity and considers her “a weak human idea” (326), implying the dangers of misinterpreting the deity’s roles.

The other deity that Okorafor reimagines is Ogun, who is introduced as one of the heroes in the Great Book. When Onyesonwu meets the blacksmith, who would later be her stepfather, she expresses her knowledge of the Great Book and mulls that the man “could have been the son of Ogun, the goddess of metal” (8). According to Sandra Barnes, an anthropologist, Ogun is a powerful male West African deity believed to originate from the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. She describes him as one of the persistent precolonial supernatural powers that have survived the influence of Christianity and Islam across the continent and continues to adapt to the contemporary beliefs in Africa and beyond (xiv). By naming the blacksmith ‘Ogundimu’ and intimating that Ogun is a woman, Okorafor engages in a counterfactual reconfiguration of the popular deity.

Okorafor’s mythographic utilisation of the Igbo spiritual cosmologies demonstrates how she uses her brand of YASF as a space for cultural renegotiations in the actual world. This reflects what Brian Attebery has cited as one of the cultural functions of the genre: “[to provide] new contexts, and thus inevitably new meanings, for myths. Fantasy spins stories about stories.... the most powerful and provocative fantasies recontextualise myths, placing them back into history and reminding us of their social and political power” (4). While Attebery’s remarks seem to be aimed at fantasy, YASF, especially by Okorafor, takes advantage of the blurred edges of both science fiction and fantasy in its worldbuilding. This way, Okorafor focuses us on the different perspectives of myths and African cosmologies, urging a reinterpretation of narratives in ways that encourage divergent perspectives.

Another aspect of characterological counterfactuals is dramatised by Onyesonwu’s ability to traverse different worlds in different forms, enabling her to escape some of the discriminations she faces in the textual actual world. She is unwanted by both the Okeke and the Nuru because of her mixed heritage (72). However, her ability to shapeshift into different animals and birds offers her alternatives to see the world without the oppressive categorisations sanctioned by the Great Book. Dannenberg has argued that characterological counterfactuals enable a character to have a change in her “personality in order to create a counterfactual antecedent” (120). For instance, of all the reptiles and birds she is able to shapeshift to, she finds a “sense of power” (89) as a vulture because it allows her to see her immediate environment, Jwahir, from a vantage point where she sees it as if she has been to “greater places” (89). This suggests



that as a vulture, she has access to different worldviews that readers do not know about, but which give her a sense of escape from Jwahir's oppressive traditions.

The text also constructs the desert as a third space that the Great Book does not govern as a rule book. It is presented as a place for outcasts and the undocumented. For instance, after being raped, Najeeba, Onyesonwu's mother, finds the desert a safe place for herself and her unborn child. There is also a community of nomads, the 'Red People' who live in a travelling sandstorm but whose existence is only treated as a myth because they are not documented in the Great Book, excluding them from the Okeke-Nuru dichotomy (270). They, therefore, live beyond the confines of the stereotypes of both groups and are not bound by their moral values. Onyesonwu's time in the desert with this community is crucial to her development as a hero. They help her sharpen her skills in readiness to rewrite the Great Book and guide her in unlearning much of what she had learnt in her previous society.

The novel uses the counterfactual mode to offer commentary on the actual world's historical and sociological issues by drawing inspiration from a specific historical moment in Sudan, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this section. Okorafor tackles some of Africa's most persistent social problems, such as gender and civil wars, by interrogating their roots. This is consistent with Attebery's argument that fantasy's capacity for mythopoeia lies in "its adaptability to changing intellectual currents and its applicability to a host of social needs" (8). The narrative presents female genital mutilation as a "two-thousand-year-old tradition" (34), which has long been abandoned but is kept going by a group of women who consider themselves the custodians of the cultural practices, some of which are meant to keep women under patriarchal control.

Even though outdated and now voluntary, Onyesonwu feels compelled to undergo the 'Eleventh Rite' initiation if that is what it would take to be accepted into the society because of the belief that it is the only way to womanhood. She says that "after a girl goes through her Eleventh Rite, she's worthy of being spoken to as an adult" (34). She, therefore, voluntarily submits to one of the fictional society's misogynistic traditions as a way of compromising and turning such societal obstacles into her tools for the impending quest. By presenting the initiation as a necessary step for Onyesonwu in her quest to rewrite the Great Book, Okorafor utilises the archetypal hero's journey where the hero is expected to undergo some stages of initiation and form a bond with fellow initiates. Later in the narrative, Onyesonwu uses the magic to undo the cut for herself and her friends, depicting the text's transformation of the

Jungian archetypal quest of the hero. Undoing the cut suggests auditing the steps of the hero's journey, doing away with those that are unnecessary, oppressive, and inconsistent with Onyesonwu's quest to dismantle the patriarchal system.

The text presents the actual world as a long-gone historical period with the evidence of computers found in a cave. The Great Book itself, as I have discussed above, is extracted from these computers. In the novel, the computers are presented as "old and amazingly ancient things packed in a cave in the middle of nowhere and long forgotten" (356). The fact that Onyesonwu and her group come across such a cave in the desert as they had read in the Great Book is a key moment in the text because it is here that Onyesonwu seems to change her mind on the content of the Great Book, realising that parts of it may be true. She pauses to ask: "Did this mean that parts of the Great Book were true? Had the Okeke really crammed technology away in caves to hide them from an angry goddess?" (356). Onye's questions further expose the inaccuracies in the book, which only the reader can identify. Nevertheless, the questions also open her mind to the multiplicity of versions of the past, which may be consistent with the Great Book or in opposition to its content. The counterfactuality of this moment is twofold; the characters in the textual world come into direct contact with the myths and history written in the Great Book. It also portrays the actual world of the reader as part of the obsolete past that is mythologised.

The ending of *Who Fears Death* is complex and reflects what Dannenberg has described as "radical metafiction"—the creation of "multiple versions of a story, created through multiple bifurcations" (216). There are visible distortions in the temporal sequence of the narrative, leaving the reader with multiple possibilities as endings. In the final chapters, the narration becomes complex by introducing multiple first-person points of view by witnesses to Onyesonwu's story with different versions of how everything ends. In the first ending, which is in Onyesonwu's voice, the Great Book has been rewritten, and the kingdom waits to experience change. However, for Onyesonwu, "fate must play out" (410), a statement that is open-ended and leaves room for multiple interpretations.

The second version of the story's ending is told from another character's perspective, a Nuru journalist who witnessed the ending and interviewed Onyesonwu for her story. In her narration, she likens Onyesonwu to "a character locked in a story" (411) because she seems unable to save herself from her inevitable fate. However, this version is rendered by a witness who observed the change that Onyesonwu promises in the first version after rewriting the Great

Book. The wave of change is seen in her parting gifts to the women before she was stoned and cremated:

All the women, Okeke and Nuru, found that something had changed about them. Some could turn wine to fresh sweet drinking water, others glowed in the dark at night, some could hear the dead. Others remembered the past, before the Great Book. Others could peruse the spirit world and still live in the physical. Thousands of abilities. All bestowed upon women. There it was—Onye’s gift. In the death of herself and her child, Onye gave birth to us all. This place will never be the same. Slavery is over. (413)

This version of the ending challenges the traditional Jungian archetypal hero<sup>7</sup> in the sense that Onyesonwu, a woman, does not seem to make the complete cycle as a male hero who is expected to make a return to his people after a successful adventure. It is also the ending where Onyesonwu’s transformative feminist power is seen and felt the most. The feminist utopia is more explicit in this ending with the boons that she gifts women to mark the end of slavery sanctioned by the Great Book.

The third version of the story’s ending is told from the point of view of yet another first-person narrator, Sola, who presents Onyesonwu as angry and retributive: her “very essence was change and defiance” (415). This is shown by the fact that Okorafor dedicates an entire chapter to the symbol of the peacock, which according to Sola, means that even though Onyesonwu is indeed dead, scribbling the symbol on the floor of her cell means that she “has been wronged...and is going to take action” (416). Furthermore, this version challenges the notion of a feminist utopia in the previous ending, suggesting that the gifts that Onyesonwu left to the women were more harmful to them as they “began encountering the ghosts of those men wiped out by [Onyesonwu’s]...impetuous actions” (415). This ending also suggests that even though Onyesonwu rewrites the Great Book, it only leads to more evil. Like in *The Book of Phoenix*, Onyesonwu’s counterfactual goals when she wipes out all fertile men do not materialise according to this ending.

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<sup>7</sup> Jung’s hero is masculine and is often faced with difficult tasks that he has to overcome before returning to his home victorious. Despite the perils that the hero might go through in the course of his quest, he has to achieve something significant before returning home. See Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p167.

Still, another version of the story's ending is told as a rewriting of the first chapter. This version presents Onyesonwu as angry and resistant, unlike in the previous versions, she does not give her captors a chance and puts up a battle against them because "she was not a sacrifice to be made for the good of men and women" (418). Furthermore, the narrator revisits the introductory scene where a dejected Onyesonwu attempts to bring her dead stepfather back to life and makes a strong intertextual correspondence with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1961):

She thought of the Palm Wine Drunkard in the Great Book. All he lived for was to drink his sweet, frothy palm wine. When one day his expert palm wine tapper fell from a tree and died, he was distraught. But then he realised if his tapper was dead and gone, then he must be somewhere else. And so the Drunkard's quest began. (418)

While it is a fact that the tapper is dead, the 'Drunkard' counterfactually believes that he must be somewhere else, which leads to the construction of another world, a space that Okorafor utilises. The above passage is a synopsis of Tutuola's classic novel and unlike what the reader encounters with Okorafor's intertextual correspondence with Butler, the characterological counterfactuals, in this case, "generates different character versions" (Dannenber, *Coincidence* 122). On the one hand, Tutuola's 'drinkard' is a male travelling to the world of the dead because his daily supply of wine is interrupted by the death of his tapper. On the other hand, Onyesonwu traverses the world of the dead during her initiation to prepare her to face a powerful male anti-hero who is the custodian of the Great Book. Their missions to these worlds are thus different; the man's voluntary while Onyesonwu's is a prophecy that must be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, the transworld journeys between the two narratives allow Okorafor to extend the worlds in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to aid her myth creation. The title, *Who Fears Death*, resonates strongly with the main character's name in Tutuola's classic novel, who introduces himself as 'the father of gods who can do anything' or 'the palm wine drinkard.' Tutuola's protagonist's name seems to answer Okorafor's title, *Who Fears Death*, which reads like a question and is also the English translation of her protagonist's name, Onyesonwu. The Palm-Wine Drinkard's arduous journey to the land of the dead attests to his fearlessness against death. This gives the reader an idea of how Onyesonwu and her companion, Mwitá, are likely to reunite and shows how the postulated existence of an alternate world where they will meet offers hope and agency to the characters. The spiritual world where Tutuola's protagonist

travels is known as the ‘Deads’ Town’, similar to the ‘wilderness’ in the world of *Who Fears Death*. It is a safe place for Onyesonwu in the battle against her biological father, Daib, and she believes that is where she will meet Mwita, who dies before her. Just like the palm wine drinkard can meet his dead palm wine tapper who gives him an egg to use to meet all his needs, Onyesonwu believes that she will summon Mwita from the dead and love him again.

The land of the dead is thus an alternate world that is intertextually constructed through existing fiction. Such kind of setting-creation, Matt Hills argues, constitutes “counterfiction”, which operates “as a form of counterfactuality” (437). He argues that the “construction and interpretation of counterfictions...depends on, for both the writer and the reader, on intertextual knowledge and cues” (441). He implies that both the reader and the writer must be aware of a certain fictional world to understand how the text occupies and “re-ontologises” it (Hills 441). Therefore, *Who Fears Death* contemporises *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by incorporating magical realism, fantasy, futuristic technologies, African mythologies, and religious cosmologies into Okorafor’s work. Indeed, literary critic Jane Bryce notes that Tutuola’s work, which was not given the same attention as realist texts such as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, is a forebear in the genealogy of African speculative fiction that the likes of Okorafor are building on (2). By intertextually disrupting the existent fictional worlds, *Who Fears Death* produces an alternate world that critiques the actual world.

I conclude this chapter by looking back at Jewelle Gomez’s concerns in the 1980s that black science fiction and fantasy writers were not making enough use of African female historical figures. The works discussed in this chapter are a strong response. Gomez’s concerns resonate with Warner’s quote at the beginning of this chapter in the sense that even though speculative writers read the histories of African women who participated in anti-colonial and nationalist clamours and contributed to changing the course of their nations’ histories, they seemed not to notice that their stories were passed over and not represented well enough in popular culture (9). She envisions speculative fiction as a possible repository for the heroics of Africa’s women leaders and warriors such as Amina, the queen of Zaria in Nigeria, Mekatilili wa Menza of Kenya, Cleopatra of Egypt, Nzingha of Angola, Yaa Asantewa of Ashanti kingdom in the former Gold Coast (now Ghana), Nandi, the queen of Zulu in South Africa and Makeda the Queen of Sheba in Ethiopia. According to Gomez, utilising stories that draw from the histories and mythologies of the actual African world in black speculative fiction provides an avenue to shift from the Euroamerican ideas of heroism predicated on white male domination (10). Even though this has been an established literary canon in itself, Okorafor and Ifueko continue the

work Gomez, Butler, and Hopkinson started to disrupt the science fiction genre further. They use YASF to turn the archetypal hero on its head and establish a canon that renders YASF a site for counterfactual thought.

The texts discussed in this chapter demonstrate growth in African speculative fiction, positioning it as a crucial space for reinterpreting myths, history, and presenting realities in a manner that gives them new meanings. I have argued that the two writers adapt the changing literary landscape to their advantage and use the spaces within and outside the borders of the genre to create a new centre where African mythologies, histories, cosmologies, and spiritualities are used alongside futuristic technologies. In this worldbuilding, these writers are disrupting archetypes and finding new ways of understanding the subjectivity of Africans in general and black women in particular. Both Ifueko and Okorafor depict heroines who are young, black, complex, and ready to step up to transform their textual worlds. However, counterfactual analyses of the three novels reveal that the two authors also take different approaches.

On the one hand, Ifueko presents a less complex view of the transformative power of stories. This is articulated in the ease with which her heroine is able to access hidden stories from objects and contact with other characters. The supreme deity, the Storyteller, can also be manipulated and their repository of memories compromised by the insidious patriarchal powers. The novel, therefore, presents a textual actual world that is unique and quite different from the actual world. It is a possible world where the heroine's quest to rewrite the oppressive narratives does not run into constraints of the actual world because she has a way of easily going through them. On the other hand, in Okorafor's two novels, which are related, even though she creates a textual universe where multiple worlds interact, her heroines are more tangled up in the history of the actual world. This explains the unstable endings of both texts, where the attempts by Phoenix and Onyesonwu to rewrite narratives that would lead to a new and better world do not succeed or only succeed partially. My discussion in this chapter reveals how the speculative fiction genre makes a strong claim for orality as a counterfactual space, with writers like Ifueko and Okorafor invoking traditional African storytelling techniques in their narratives. In the next chapter, I conclude the study by reflecting on how counterfactuals can be useful in interrogating how contemporary women writers engage with the three understandings of myth I have explored in this dissertation.

## Conclusion

### African Women's Fiction and the Promise of Counterfactuals

And here is where history falters. According to [a] popular song, Kidane is interrupted by Aster, who appears like a ghost next to her husband. The story goes that on the day the great Kidane mobilized his men, a lone figure rose up from her bed to heed his call to fight.... But Aster does not rise from her bed and walk to her husband while dressed in his clothes. She does not take her husband's hand and pledge her allegiance.... No: Aster stands up from her bed...moves, uncaped and unapologetic, out of the land of the aggrieved because she remembers what he does not.... (Mengiste 61-62)

In closing, I return to the above scene in *The Shadow King*, which neatly encapsulates what the women writers whose works I investigate in this thesis are doing with narratives such as myths and history. Here, Hirut, who is telling the story of the 1935-41 Italo-Ethiopian war, contradicts how Aster, whom she fought alongside in the war, is portrayed by History and songs composed to praise her. She relies on her memory and takes the reader through what History has captured correctly and reveals details of what is misrepresented or missing. Like Hirut, each of the diasporic African women writers whose works I have investigated in this thesis is intervening where narratives falter in their representation of women. My discussion has explored the selected novels as counterfactual narratives that engage three different understandings of myth: myths as traditional tales, the mythologising function of history, and science fiction as new forms of myth. I have demonstrated that by analysing these texts as such, it is possible to tease out how these writers challenge the androcentric gender notions in myth and history by focusing their imagination on the silenced, elided, and undermined stories of African women.

The discussion in Chapter One has outlined the theoretical concepts that have informed my examination of the texts in this thesis. I begin by exploring how the interactions between African oral histories and western forms of literacy played a key role in excluding and misrepresenting African women in such narratives. I have reiterated that western forms of literacy advantaged African men, which means that they took it as their role to transcribe African histories into these new forms while relying on male informers. Even though such narratives make up 'official stories' about African nations, they are biased and faltering. Therefore, I have explored methods that have been proposed by scholars of separating the

myths from history or facts from fabrications. For instance, Okpewho's time-space continuum provides a useful way of following the progress of stories and delineating what becomes historical facts from what is treated as myths. The back-and-forth movement of stories between the unknown worlds of myth and known worlds of history demonstrates the possibility of using the arc to create or fill gaps in narratives, making it a crucial tool for mythmaking and historiography. The continuum thus allows us to see these two processes as hinged on a juxtaposition of what happened and what did not happen but was imagined.

Okpewho's continuum and its interplay between time/space and presences/absences work on the same premise as counterfactual theories. However, I have demonstrated in the chapter that the counterfactuals enable a more comprehensive engagement with myth and history, especially how they are used in literary works. I have outlined some of the concepts of the theory, and in the following pages, I reflect on how they have illuminated my examination of the novels in this thesis. Worth noting from my engagement with the counterfactuals is that despite being a broad concept, what counts as a counterfactual novel is narrowly defined. The common understanding of such novels is espoused by theorists such as Gallagher, who argues that authors make deliberate decisions to alter historical facts and render alternative histories in such novels (2). The texts I have examined in this thesis do not conform to this conventional approach to counterfactuals. As a matter of fact, none of the authors sets out to imagine a different outcome to a historical event. However, each takes facts, historical figures, known histories, and myths, and reworks them in different ways that show that even though the outcomes remain unchanged, new versions of events where women play key roles are imagined. I have demonstrated in my analysis that the processes of seeking, uncovering, and re-representing women's stories in myth and history are essential aspects of counterfactuality. My reading of these texts in this manner has benefited from Andreas Widmann's expanded conceptualisation of the counterfactual history novel as one that "[employs] narrative devices [to] introduce new interpretations by making up alternative facts", which unsettle some key "cornerstones" of history (188). These cornerstones do not have to be the outcome of events, as I have argued above.

The introduction of new interpretations of facts not only gives us a different perspective of the past; it also underpins the role of counterfactuals in aiding our understanding of how narratives work. For instance, in Chapter Two, the novels have shown how myths (as traditional tales) work; in Chapter Three, they have demonstrated how histories work, while in Chapter Four,



they have explored how new myths might be written. In each chapter, the texts have used the actual world as a starting point or as a reference from which they draw images that they use in their construction of the textual actual worlds.

In Chapter Two, I have examined how an interplay of myth and history in *Kintu* and *Homegoing* allows interrogation of these narratives as well as producing alternative versions of the past. In both novels, Makumbi and Gyasi have used myth to unsettle history and history to unsettle myth in their representation of women. Given that mythological worlds are unverifiable, these authors have used historical contexts from the actual world to fill gaps in both historical and mythic narratives and to expose their limits. In *Kintu*, Makumbi has used the rigid designator to connect different versions of Kintu in actual and textual actual worlds as well as the mythological worlds. By having the same figure with the same proper name in different contexts through different narrative forms, Makumbi connects myth to history and has demonstrated that changing the way a story is told also changes the story. Such a use of the rigid designator reveals its demythologising function. *Kintu* has presented readers with alternative versions of Kintu in different worlds, contradicting how his story has always been told in the actual world. The image of Kintu depicted as the originator of a generational curse lamenting the workings of traditions radically undermines the myth that has been considered a fact of Buganda's social life since it imposes certain norms that have been valued for generations. As such, Makumbi's reworking of the myth has also demonstrated that some of such norms are binding and cannot be discarded, but a new understanding of cooperation can be imagined.

Makumbi has demonstrated that demythologising a mythical figure through the rigid designator also offers new insights and interpretations of other figures in the myth whose roles have previously been elided, undermined or misrepresented. Besides Kintu, she has deployed characters who contest or expose the complexities of gender roles sanctioned by the myth. For example, even though Nnambi does not feature in the text as a character, her roles have been reinterpreted through Kintu's wives in the textual actual world. They assert themselves as co-creators by subverting the notion of masculine virility, which gives Kintu the recognition and the aura as the mythological 'father of the nation.'

Furthermore, my reading reveals that Makumbi's portrayal of princes and princesses in the textual actual world suggests that even though the Kintu myth influenced gender relations in pre-colonial Buganda, women's roles in social and political structures were far more complex. It emerges from the novel that while they appeared to be at the centre of stabilising the nation, they were also pawns in the kingdom's patriarchal political power schemes. Through these contradictions, Makumbi suggests that matriarchal power in pre-colonial Buganda seemed to decorate patriarchy by aiding its dominance while at the same time mocking its power through radical and subversive female figures who have the means to overthrow the kings at whim. Deploying such characters who go against the norms imposed by the myth is an instance where history intervenes to undermine the myth. Such a counterfactual reading of *Kintu* exposes androcentric myths as preferring unified identities but are themselves divisive and oppressive.

In *Homegoing*, a different interaction between myth and history emerges. While the text is a straightforward historical fiction that traces slavery in West Africa and America, Gyasi explores the impacts of generational trauma through mythopoesis. Unlike Makumbi, she does not put the Akan mythic material at the centre of her textual actual world. However, she uses dreams as alternate worlds that connect victims of slavery and their descendants who still bear the emotional impacts of their ancestors' enslavement. Retelling the history of slavery through an alternate world of dreams is a strategic decision by Gyasi to expose the limits of the narrative of history in articulating the emotional intensity of trauma. Its narration of events through causality fails to capture the personal experiences of ordinary people affected by such events. In addition, Gyasi has demonstrated her vision to retell the stories of African women impacted by slavery by tracing the different generations in the textual actual world through matrilineal lines.

In Chapter Three, I have investigated the mythologising function of History where certain stories are elevated to positions of dominance and considered the only official versions of the past that are not open to revision—a myth. My discussion in this chapter has reinforced the idea that the writing of History is always a selective process where those in power may prioritise some stories over others. I opened the chapter with a quote by Ettore, a character in Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King*, where he states that “there is no past, there is no ‘what happened,’ there is only the moment that unfolds into the next” (410). The statement encapsulates the engagement of the counterfactuals with History, where what happened and

the imagined ‘what could have been’ are fused. The fusion enables an engagement with linear narratives by teasing out their inconsistencies and contesting their exclusionary tendencies.

I have examined Mengiste’s use of artefacts such as photos and songs as counterfactual in the sense that by reinterpreting their meanings, she unravels a shadow history of the Italo-Ethiopian war to contest its misrepresentation by the Italian archive. The scene with which I have introduced this conclusion is one such example. Central to the production of this shadow history is Mengiste’s use of the rigid designator, which strongly resonates with Makumbi’s even though the two authors have engaged different understandings of myths, as I reveal in this thesis. Her depiction of Emperor Haile Selassie in the textual actual world undermines his mythologised status in Ethiopia and around the world. The most notable mythologising of Haile Selassie is the reverence the Rastafari religion accords him as the “God of the black race” (“Haile Selassie and Africa” para.2). Like Makumbi does with the figure of Kintu, Mengiste’s demythologising of Selassie comes with a counterfactual reimagination of the war where the outcome remains the same, but women’s roles in the battlefield are foregrounded. The novel demonstrates this by rendering the story of the war from the memory of one of the female characters who fought in the war in the textual actual world. The idea of the ‘Shadow King’ in the novel comes from her recollections of Ethiopians who participated in the war in the absence of the emperor.

In *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, my analysis demonstrates that counterfactuals can perform healing and transformative functions, especially in moments of trauma. Even though the text is historical fiction that draws from events of the 1978 Somalia coup, Mohamed focuses on the trauma of war on female victims. The counterfactuals are simulated in the characters’ minds revealing the trajectory of the events that caused the trauma and the alternative scenarios they hope could have prevented the negative events. I demonstrate in my analysis that by disnarrating certain memories, whether positive or negative, and replacing them with new imagined scenarios, Mohamed shows the possibility of using counterfactuals to narrate the emotional impacts of reality. I have characterised the simulations in the characters’ minds as instances of upward and downward counterfactuals. An example of upward counterfactuals is in the scene where Kawsar imagines she could have done more to protect her daughter from being brutalised and murdered by agents of the regime. Through these simulations, the text introduces the reader to another narrative, which reveals her role as being part of a group of women known as ‘mothers of the revolution’ that helped bring the regime to power. However,

these women have since been forgotten, and their place taken by a new group of brutal, power-wielding women.

Another instance of upward counterfactuals is demonstrated by Filsan, who imagines that she would get more recognition and respect as a soldier if she were a man or closer to the Governor. Through her, the novel demonstrates that even with state power, there is a constant degree of dehumanisation and marginalisation to which women are subjected by the regime. As a result, women with state power rechannel their trauma and brutalise other powerless women. In both examples I have provided, upward counterfactuals are characterized by a sense of regret over actions an individual did not take or what did not happen to them. In contrast, downward counterfactuals imagine a negative outcome of events and come with the satisfaction of avoiding such actions. Mengiste and Mohamed demonstrate in the two novels how African women writers are shifting the ground from a situation where men write stories of war about other men to a situation where women reinterpret their stories or tell them anew.

Even though counterfactual history novels such as *The Shadow King* and *The Orchard of Lost Souls* have significant degrees of speculation, they are more skewed towards the past. This is different from speculative fiction, which I have discussed in Chapter Four in my interrogation of the role and consequence of the selected writers' works as producing new forms of myths. Ifueko and Okorafor have demonstrated the need for the expansion of the genre of science fiction to incorporate African mythologies, spiritualities, and futuristic technologies. In *Raybearer*, for instance, Ifueko has presented a less complex dramatisation of Eric Selbin's arguments on the contradictory power of stories in either creating History or destabilising its dominance (49). These contradictions are realised through the concepts of negation and disnarration; for instance, the protagonist Tarisai erases her memory to forget her mother's story. However, she has to restore the originally disnarrated memories because they are crucial in her quest to uncover elided and misrepresented stories of women like her mother's. In contrast, Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix* present a much more complex engagement with the power of stories. Okorafor's characters are more tangled up with the history of the actual world. While they are trying to create other possible worlds where normative categorisations in the actual world and the textual actual world are dismantled, they face constraints that make their missions less successful.

Furthermore, what emerges from my reading of the three texts is how they dramatise characterological counterfactuals in diverse and interesting ways. This is an aspect of counterfactuality that seeks to dismantle normative gender binaries. It draws on Kate Millett's assertion that the binary between male and female is a creation of patriarchy which considers "male...as the human norm, subject and referent to which the female is 'Other' or alien" (46). This is extended by Birte Christ's feminist approach to counterfactuals, which puts men and their dominance as the 'norm' or social fact, while women, the dominated Other, are the resistant counterfact (190). As the perceived norm, men assume power and prescribe gender roles that keep the hierarchies in place. The Nigerian feminist, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, however, contends that the male/female and man/woman binaries are not applicable in most African contexts and thus 'male' does not translate to 'norm' as in the western context. She notes, for instance, that in her native Yoruba, there exists words that do not connote the male and female categories and any ranking associated with them is only applicable to adults (33). As the works of speculative fiction in this thesis have shown, characterological counterfactuals are key tools for feminist literary analysis. They are particularly useful in understanding how African speculative fiction negotiates various concepts of gender as they apply to African contexts.

Both Ifueko and Okorafor have endowed their female protagonists with various abilities that I have examined as instances of characterological counterfactuals. For instance, these characters have access to different possible worlds within the textual universe that the reader has no knowledge about. The reader has to rely on their narration to fathom the agency these spaces accord them in their quests, which involve facing strong patriarchal forces. For example, in *Raybearer*, Tarisai is one of the few characters who can access an aperture, a reservoir of memories on a mountain, to extract its stories, which contradict or fact-check those sanctioned by the emperor's council. Okorafor's texts demonstrate complex instances of characterological counterfactuals. In *Who Fears Death*, part of Onyesonwu's preparation in the quest to rewrite the Great Book involves an initiation process that happens in a world beyond the textual actual world. She also finds freedom in the moments when she shapeshifts to a vulture, which give her a different perspective of the textual actual world and allow her to escape its subjectivities. Furthermore, she has access to another possible world, the 'wilderness', an unknown world where she confronts her adversaries and meets her mentors. While Haraway's idea of the cyborg figure as genderless would be the ideal case of characterological counterfactual, Okorafor's cyborg, Phoenix, is conscious of her gender but is endowed with the ability to do more than the cyborg Haraway imagines. A fusion of futuristic genetic engineering as well as

mythical qualities as the self-appointed daughter of an Igbo deity, she can shapeshift, fly across the ocean, set herself ablaze, and come back to life like the mythical Phoenix. She is thus a complex identity that stretches the limits of categorisations of the cyborg.

The complexity of characterological counterfactuals in Okorafor's two novels is demonstrated further in their unstable endings. The protagonists do not seem to succeed in their quests despite the agencies their different abilities accord them. One of the endings in *Who Fears Death* demonstrates an instance of what I describe as radical characterological counterfactuals where the author stretches the limits of counterfactuality to imagine a possible world where there are no fertile men while all fertile women are accorded pregnancies. Worth exploring further as an example of a radical characterological counterfactual novel is Lauren Beukes' *Afterland*, in which she creates a possible world where all men have been killed by an epidemic leaving only one man who has to be accorded extra protection as an endangered species.

Beyond Okorafor's two texts that I have examined in this thesis, her oeuvre is replete with a borrowing of characters either from her other texts or from other authors'. This is a different kind of characterological counterfactuality where the same character plays similar or different roles in more than one text. For example, the invocation of the textual actual world of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in *Who Fears Death* is an addition of another possible world within the textual universe that the protagonist can access. I have argued that this is a contemporising of Tutuola's classic novel, which is a trailblazer in the kind of imagination of the African space that Okorafor produces.

Ifueko's and Okorafor's novels have underpinned African speculative fiction as a flexible space where counterfactual thought can be tested. This is not only demonstrated by the alternate possible worlds that they create, but these works also subvert Suvin's conservative approach to science fiction as exclusively literary and scientific (378). Their incorporation of the African space provides them with the material which they use to speculate the continent's future while reflecting and commenting on its past and present realities. Even though these texts create new myths by building alternate worlds different from the actual world, Ifueko and Okorafor also invite us to unpack the historical and mythological material sedimented in the genre of African speculative fiction.

The novels in this dissertation have shown that the diasporic African women writers draw inspiration from oral forms as creative tools and important repositories of cultural memories. Whether these writers are utilising the oral forms to rework them or as sources of alternative histories, the focus of these novels has resonated with the Nigerian scholar Mary Modupe Kolawole's assertion that the oral genre is a space for women to assert their creativity, to make visible and give voice to female figures from myth and history (92). Their varied use of oral forms suggests that while they are spaces for women's collective consciousness, there is no homogeneity in African women's stories. Their stories are varied and can only be captured through a comprehensive approach that accommodates contradictions and differences.

I hypothesised in the introduction that the African diasporic identities of the selected writers for this thesis influence how they engage with their nations' narratives. I speculated that the geographical distance and their transcultural experiences allow them to see their home countries' histories and myths through a different perspective. From my reading of the selected texts as well as other material for this research, it is fair to confirm that this is only true to a certain extent. While these writers offer interesting engagements with African narratives imbued with their transnational identities, the project of reimagining African women in myth and history is not limited to them. For instance, other writers based in the continent, such as Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor of Kenya and Ayesha Harruna Attah of Ghana, amongst many others, are doing something similar in *Dust* and *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, respectively, just to mention a few examples. These writers are mobile and have transcultural experiences within their countries, Africa, and across the world. Their writings incorporate the interesting ways these contemporary African writers, whether based on the continent or in the diaspora, are going back to myths and the archive to reimagine the representations of women.

While the counterfactual approach is still underexplored in African literary studies, it offers valuable and necessary tools for uncovering the misrepresented, elided, and altogether undermined stories of women. Moreover, it is a promising space for expanding the diverse feminist approaches that Africans continue to theorise because it encourages a multiplicity of approaches and stories. As my analysis in this thesis has shown, the theory is broad and can be narrowed down as contexts and purposes demand. A case in point is Gerald Prince's concept of 'The Disnarrated', which I have used in this thesis in different ways. First, it has been utilised in novels such as *The Shadow King* and *Raybearer* as a way for the story to fact-check itself. Second, it fact-checks the narratives outside of the story, which also comes out clearly in *The*

*Shadow King*. Lastly is the healing role of disnarration, which is internal to characters within a work of fiction, as demonstrated by *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. In all these instances, the concept is a useful tool for unsettling narratives and uncovering alternative ones.

My analysis has also demonstrated that while the concepts within counterfactual theory can be utilised independently to analyse literary works, they blend in most instances. For instance, the concepts of possible worlds, transworld identity, counterpart theory, and the rigid designator are fluid and work together whether in historical or speculative fiction. As I have highlighted earlier in this section, this has been demonstrated by the figures of Kintu and Haile Selassie in *Kintu* and *The Shadow King*, respectively. Furthermore, counterfactual theories also integrate with other theories and approaches that have been used to study African fiction. As contemporary African fiction continues to interrogate the past, with different previously marginalised groups increasingly rewriting their stories, counterfactuals stand as useful tools in exposing fault lines, irrationalities, and fragilities in narratives such as myth and history that seem fixed, deadening and controlling. Therefore, the counterfactual theory would be valuable not only for studying this specific group of women writers but also for any writer whose work rethinks how our social, cultural, and political beliefs are structured and want to intervene where narratives falter and need to be told properly.



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