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Ongoing Repercussions

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American Book Review, Volume 41, Number 3, March/April 2020, pp. 27-28 (Review)

Published by American Book Review
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2020.0047*

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The Shadow King

Maaza Mengiste

W. W. Norton & Company
www.wwnorton.com/
448 Pages; Cloth, $18.87

"It was a massacre!" Ethiopia's history and character take center stage in Maaza Mengiste's novel *The Shadow King*, which begins in 1974 but focuses on Italy's takeover of Ethiopia from 1935-41. Did the Italians drop mustard gas on whole villages, literally burning the skin off their bodies? Did Mussolini's Colonel in charge, Carlo Fucelli, murder Ethiopian guerilla fighters instead of putting them into the huge prison he built? In the novel, he forces masses of captured Ethiopian prisoners to jump from a high cliff to their deaths. At the same time, he taunts the remaining Ethiopian freedom fighters by keeping two of their women soldiers in a cage and humiliating and photographing them daily as Italian soldiers jeer: "She is a body crashing through restraining hands, spinning so wildly that Ettore cannot take a photograph. When the top of her dress is pulled down, she pulls it up. When she is pushed against the wall, she slides down to the ground. When the colonel comes to yank her upright, she grabs his legs to throw him down." Why was this holocaust not on my radar?

In the novel, the Italian photographer turns an image of the caged women into a popular (racist and sexist) postcard. Yet, ironically, photographer Ettore Navarra is secretly Jewish, and Jews are being rounded up in Italy, losing their jobs — and "disappearing" — so Ettore's days seem numbered even though he always obeys the Colonel's orders. Ettore's father Leo writes tortured letters to tell his son about his prior marriage, his first son, and his life before he escaped from Odessa to Venice and married Gabriella, but she realizes that the letters put Leo's and Ettore's lives in danger and she destroys them before Ettore can read them. The reader therefore learns more about Ettore's father's past than the son. Even though Ettore has no religion, the Colonel knows he was born Jewish and shields him. The Colonel also disobeys orders and keeps an Ethiopian mistress and her cook in the camp. One day Ettore receives one letter from his father; he treasures this, for he realizes he will never see his parents again. The fate of this letter is juggled in each of the four books of this novel; Hirut has it in 1974 as she goes to meet Ettore.

Hirut is the leading character in this four hundred plus page novel. She is a peasant, the daughter of Getey and Fasil, and she eventually marries Aklilu, but we never see the marriage or anything resembling a conventional life. We see her given as a servant to care for Aster when Aster is given to Kidane in marriage. We see the reasons why and the method by which Aster leaves

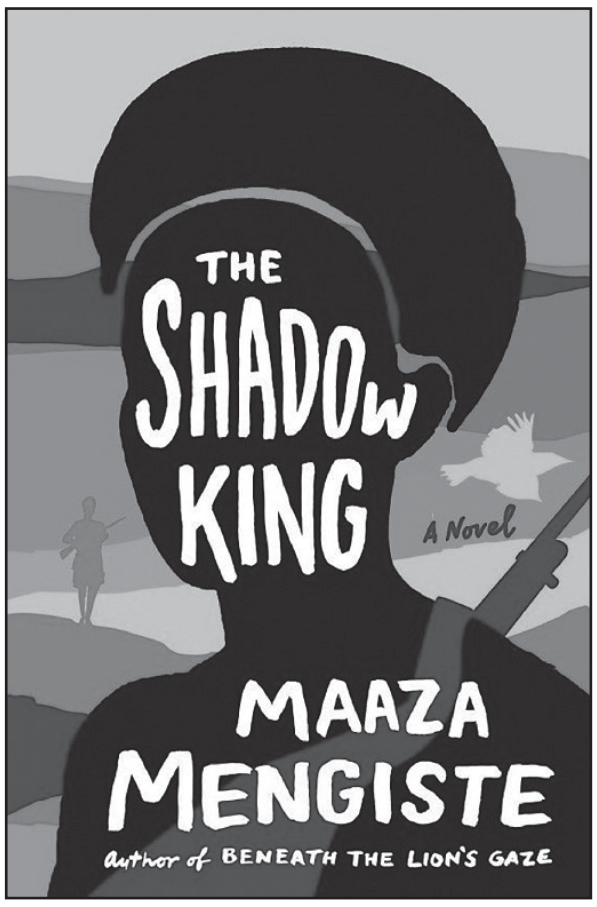
Mengiste's lush writing style memorializes each main character and interweaves the histories of each.

a deep scar near Hirut's collarbone. We see Aster as somewhat spoiled and as an unwilling, innocent bride. We see Kidane as a male balancing the hurts he receives from Aster, his training as a soldier and a leader of men, and moments of kindness toward Hirut. Kidane has seen Hirut grow up, and he knew her parents. He favors her in part because of these long ties and in part since Aster has been cruel to them both. Hirut owns nothing but her father's rifle, which she hides and which Kidane takes away to give to a young man. Aster is jealous of Hirut's raw natural beauty and Kidane's kindness toward her.

The reader sees Hirut brutalized twice by Kidane. The second time, we see his frenzy and his hidden motives as Hirut fights him with every ounce of her being. Kidane's role in leading the Ethiopian forces to resist the Italians is huge, dangerous, and continues after the cities have been tamed into submission.

Even though Salman Rushdie blurbs that he "devoured" this novel in two days, it took me over two weeks to read this epic. The lush writing style memorializes each main character and interweaves the histories of each — from Hirut, Aster, and Kidane to the Italian Colonel, Carlo Fucelli, his Ethiopian mistress Fifi and Fifi's cook, and soldiers on both sides — as well as Libyan mercenaries. Haile Selassie, the Emperor who fled to England after the Italians invaded, returns to Addis Ababa after the tides turn without him, in part, thanks to Minim, a peasant whose name means "nothing." Minim bears a striking resemblance to Selassie, and Aster and Hirut teach him the emperor's mannerisms, dress him in the emperor's clothes, and ride with him through the hills, giving the fighters and villagers hope that Ethiopia will outwit the Italian occupiers. Minim becomes a shadow king, and, after Selassie returns to Ethiopia but seems caged himself, he, too, becomes a shadow king. *The Shadow King* leitmotif has multiple meanings throughout the novel.

Mengiste additionally merges facts about Haile Selassie with classical myths. In the novel, the emperor is seen as a man with a rich cultural background and a guarded private life. He has



forced his beautiful fourteen-year-old daughter, Zenebwork, to marry Gugsa, a powerful Ethiopian lord "close to fifty," who then claims she died in childbirth. Gugsa opens the door to the Italian invasion. Selassie lives with the shadow of his dead daughter as he listens to *Aida,* the Verdi opera about an Egyptian commander Radamès, who falls in love with Aida, an Ethiopian princess, as their countries fight each other. Amid further complications, Aida is considered a traitor for loving a "warrior who holds her father captive and has slain her people beneath his sword." Radamès, denounced by his nations, is entombed and Aida joins him to die with him in the cave. As we know, Antigone is entombed in Sophocles' earlier tragedy as a punishment for her loyalty to family — to both brothers and not just the one who sides with her uncle Creon, the new king. She argues that god's law is higher than civil law. Mengiste updates myths in which royal women are unempowered and die for loving the wrong person. In *The Shadow King*, the emperor has, in many ways, orchestrated his own downfall, by giving his unwilling teenage daughter to a man who turns out to be his enemy. When Aster and Hirut become women soldiers and leaders, they show other women both how to participate along with the men and how to take control of their own lives. The novel suggests but does not develop on the idea that the two women become equals as soldiers but that after the war class separates their lives, life styles, and renown. Aster becomes better known as a hero.

Each reviewer needs to find the right balance between what needs to be said and letting the reader discover the plot twists and why this novel is worth reading. Each plot twist brilliantly is revealed and reinforced by word "photos," by "choruses" that comment on the action, and by parallels to The Abyssinians and the Romans, Memnon and Achilles, and to the opera *Aida*. This classicizes events in the novel's timeframe between 1935 and 1974. Ethiopia's actual history becomes a large-as-life classical myth. In some passages, the novel digs beneath and corrects the myths. As the men are preparing for war, Aster finds a photo of an Italian woman, Maria Uva, singing a chorus of "Giovinezza" as the *Cleopatra* vessel full of Italian soldiers travels to Massawa. Aster tells the cook: "We women won't sit by while they march into our homes."

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I am not an expert in relation to the depth of research Mengiste conducted. She was born in Addis Ababa in 1974 — the year that the novel ends; Haile Selassie is sequestered in his office listening to *Aida* as protesters call for his ouster. I doubt but cannot find out whether or not he changed into peasant clothes and walked to the train station and whether Hirut — or a girl soldier with another name — was there to but spots Selassie in the crowd. My impression is that this novel hues to the key historic facts but personalizes them, tells us intimate, horrific, and sometimes embarrassing details created to flesh out the varied characters. The novel teaches much about the Ethiopian and Italian languages, cultures, and histories in the 1930s and includes word pictures of Ethiopia's lush terrain and distinctive regional caves and cliffs. Above all, the novel internalizes the steps it took for Hirut and Aster to become women warriors leading other women into battle. They somehow rise from their respective positions in a culture dominated by family traditions, class, and male hierarchies of military and political leadership. The choruses, photos, and classic myths in the novel all suggest metaphorically that not only has their time come, but ours as well — if we can gain the skills, tools, and resources to rise up.

Mengiste, a creative writing professor at Queens College, has extraordinary credentials, including being a Fulbright Scholar and receiving a 2019 Creative Capital Award and a 2018 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. Mengiste is widely published in periodicals and has documentary film writing credits for *The Invisible City: Kakuma* (2016), about a refugee camp in the middle of the Turkana desert in Kenya, and *Girl Rising* (2013), the stories of nine girls from developing nations around the world. Her first novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010), was chosen one of "Ten Best Contemporary African Books" by *The Guardian*. It examines the fall of Selassie, the brutal Derg socialist military government that followed in the 70s, and its effects on the Hailu family.

The novel teaches much about the Ethiopian and Italian languages, cultures, and histories in the 1930s.

What makes *The Shadow King* so compelling to read is that Mengiste has hewn and brought to life Hirut, Aster, Kidane, and a larger-than-life operatic cast. Ethiopia is in the news as I write this in June, 2019: an attempted coup in an Ethiopian province with related murders in Addis Ababa. This suggests, as the novel suggests, that the inhumane treatment of citizens by each other and by their own and foreign governments at every level has ongoing repercussions.

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Sussman continued from page 17

Schreitend im Stürzen Schuh du
niederlegtest

[Gone white the marchland town and
marches
Drizzling snow did drive thee all about
thou livtest
In the stillness of thy mind in speaking thou
didst
Quake like tips of firs that frost has seized

The Havelsee which thou didst stir in
fleeing
Looked upon thine image in the gleaming
light
The meager burden of high princely stairs
Striding in thy falling though put down the
shoe]

Benjamin, even in this slightly transgressive foray into poetic composition, also makes space for the religious sensibility that still, in 2020, as during his lifetime, does not easily accord with either his pronounced conceptual rigor or his extreme discomfiture at sentimentality. This is no doubt a vestige of a profound engagement with liberal Jewish theology in Berlin and beyond, as epitomized by his intense lifelong friendship and intellectual exchange with Gershom Scholem. He refused to expunge this life-element from his work even as it became increasingly incompatible with other commitments and projects (e.g. Brecht's drama, Marxism). The hero's death of the *Sonnets* occasions, then, for example in Sonnet 53, a journey partly expressible in mystical terms. In different senses, both lost friend and poet are launched upon this shared spiritual quest. The motif accords not only with Scholem's early virtual fascination with the medieval literature of Jewish mysticism as his particular scene of cultural intervention; it resonates with the pitched spiritual encounters staged by Baroque lyric and drama. It was of course to this latter theater of philosophico-literary striving — precisely by dint of its proto-modernist rhetorical sensibility and practice, including allegory — that Benjamin would devote yet another major component of his ongoing critical "beat." The "barque" of Sonnet 53 is a vehicle of mystical journeys as charted by cultures all over the planet:

Sonnets ***is a modernist kaleidoscope refracting not only Benjamin's literary fascinations, but the turbulent battleground of his (often antithetical) lifetime friendships.***

Du siehst auf diesem groβen Kahn
Nicht Segel Mast noch Steuermann
Kein anderer kreuzt in den Bereichen

Ihn wirft die Woge hin und her
Von seiner Fahrt verbleibt kein Zeichen
Und seine Fracht verfällt zum Meer.

[And on this barque so grand you see
Nor sail nor mast nor steering man
No other barque will cross these zones
The waves they toss it to and fro
Its passage leaves no sign behind
Its freight falls to the sea.]

Skoggard has carefully primed us, in his essay, for departures such as the truncated lines in this piece from the general Petrarchan mold of Benjamin's *Sonnets*. "Bars of memory" (*Barre von Gedächtnis*) turn out to be the freight on this phantom vessel devoid of any substantial human direction. They serve as the ballast to be jettisoned in waters where they leave no trace. The monumental horror that the sonnet so adroitly conveys is that of a life such as Heinle's, defined by its thinking and writing, that can slip away so away so utterly, into such emptiness, the void claimed by mystical images and legends.

This type of mystical quest eventuates at the spiritual allegory that is also for Benjamin, in view of his fascination with the Baroque pyrotechnics of the image and the sign, the allegory of writing. A substantial sub-grouping of the Sonnets (7, 12, 17, 24, 26, 29, 32-4, 40-1, 45, 53, 58) hovers at the cusp between the struggles of the soul and those of the pen. A strong example, indicating where Benjamin places the project under the guiding light of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, is Sonnet 45:

Meine Seele was suchest du immer den
Schönen?
Lange ist er schon tot und die rollende Welt
ist
Ihrer Umdrehung gefolgt daß nun keiner
den Held miβt
Meine Seele was suchest du immer den
Schönen?
Warum erweckst du o Herr mich mit
Weinen und Stöhnen?
Ach ich suchte den Schlaf und von Klagen
entstellt ist
Meine Verlassenheit der dun Verlaβner
gesellt bist
Warum erweckst du o Herr mich mit
Weinen und Stöhnen?

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