

# Honouring Uncelebrated Heroes in Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*

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## Abstract

This paper examines literary representations of marginalised, uncelebrated heroes in two novels by Maaza Mengiste: *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. The central argument is that Mengiste excavates and portrays the overlooked heroic contributions of select male and female protagonists to honour their legacy and illuminate their vital yet under-recognised roles in constructing Ethiopian national identity. By adopting close textual analysis, the paper examines the conception of 'heroism' to characters derived from Mengiste's fictionalised historiography centred upon Ethiopia. Furthermore, the sociocultural and ideological factors engendering the marginalisation of these heroic figures shall be scrutinised within the novels' specific narrative contexts. Incorporating critical theoretical perspectives, the efficacy of violence as a liberating praxis against political oppression shall be evaluated through the lens of Frantz Fanon. At the same time, Marxian theories of alienation are employed to elucidate the subjective motivations compelling certain protagonists towards heroic but uncelebrated deeds. Methodologically, the paper is grounded in a close literary analysis of the theme of unheralded heroism within the two primary texts. A synthesis of supplementary scholarly perspectives bolsters this paper's central thesis regarding unrecognised heroic narratives. The paper argues that despite contributing substantially to anti-oppressive struggles, Mengiste's marginal protagonists remain uncelebrated within Ethiopia's dominant historical discourses due to their race, class, gender, and ideological positionality.

## Keywords

*Uncelebrated hero,  
Violence,  
Oppression,  
Liberating force,  
Fighting*

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## Introduction

Great things are oftentimes revered and celebrated within different societies. Nevertheless, some people's achievements go unnoticed. Historically, some people are recognised as national heroes and heroines for actively fighting against political oppression in Ethiopia. For instance, Orłowska (2013) observes that Emperor Menelik II is celebrated as a national hero in Ethiopia for his contribution to fighting against Italian colonial domination over Ethiopia. According to Adugna (2013), Lekylesh Beyan and Kebedech Seyoum are some of the heroines who are celebrated for their military achievements in fighting against Italian forces. Scholars who comment on Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* and *The Shadow King* do not focus much on the ideas of heroism and uncelebrated heroes. They focus on other issues like violence, political oppression and history, among others. I thus find it relevant to explore the concepts of heroism and uncelebrated heroes in the primary texts to fill such a gap. The paper contends that Mengiste excavates and portrays the heroic deeds of some uncelebrated male and female characters to honour them and bring to light their significant contribution to the building of Ethiopia. This study examines literary representations of uncelebrated heroes in Ethiopian American writer Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. The paper examines the notion of heroism about selected characters from a fictionalised history of Ethiopia, presented in the novels under study. It further explores different reasons that lead to the uncelebrated life of the heroes within the context of the primary texts.

There are different viewpoints with regard to the meaning of the term "hero". Literary critics Abrams and Halpham (2009), describe the hero as "a figure of great national or cosmic importance" (p. 98). The hero is "an individual or a network of people that take action on behalf of others, or in defence of integrity or a moral cause" (Kohen, 2010, p. 45). This study adopts Kohen's understanding of a hero. In this paper, the term 'uncelebrated hero' means characters who irrespective of engaging in heroic deeds through their participation in resisting and fighting against political oppression in Ethiopia, are not rewarded, recognised

or commemorated as it is the custom with other national heroes. Adugna (2013) observes that in Ethiopia, national heroes who took part in fighting against Italian invaders were celebrated by being rewarded with medals from Emperor Haile Selassie and also receiving “a significant booty from the vanquished” (2). Heroes are associated with unique attributes. Traditionally, they “are associated with concepts of triumph, courage, glory, victory, death and rebirth, selfless act, strong love for others and self –denial, success, fight for one’s right and the right of the oppressed, acceptance to die for others to survive” (Gabriel, 2021, p. 12). This study adopts Gabriel’s understanding of heroic attributes in analysing the heroic traits depicted by the characters as they carry out heroic tasks in the primary texts.

The stylistic and thematic similarities of Mengiste’s *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* have led me to analyse these texts. Both novels are set in Africa and employ historical allusion as a narrative technique to highlight events that happened in Ethiopia. Mengiste’s *The Shadow King* alludes to the events during the Second-Italo Ethiopian war. It depicts characters who resist and fight against Italian colonial domination over Ethiopia. In Mengiste’s *The Shadow King*, characters that are central to the study are Hirut, Aster, Seifu and Kidane.

On the other hand, Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* alludes to the events that happened in Ethiopia during the reign of both Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Tegegn (2012) asserts that Emperor Haile Selassie massacred “peasants and pastoralists who rebelled against the feudal land-holding system and discrimination of rural populations in Ogaden, Sidamo, Tigray, Eritrea and Bale, who at various times resorted to armed rebellions against his policy of ethnic domination in the 1960s” (p. 249). Tegegn (2012) highlights that “the genocide committed by the military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam in the 1970s that became known in Ethiopia as the Red Terror took place between 1974 and 1979” (250). Such atrocities are alluded to in Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze*. The characters significant to the study are Dawit, Anbessa, Sara and Ilita.

Mengiste’s heroes are created through violence as they resist political oppression by fighting against the Italian invaders and the Derg regime in

Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* respectively. Commenting on the *The Shadow King*, Breen (2021) observes that "violence always marks a significant moment in the lives of the characters, whether perpetrated by Italian soldiers, ascari, or Ethiopian patriots, allowing them to make essential decisions about who they are as people and their relationship to their respective homelands" (p. 31). This paper is anchored on Frantz Fanon's notion of violence as reflected in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. He asserts that the coloniser uses violence to colonise the natives while the natives also employ violence as a liberating force from colonial oppression. It should be noted that even though the Ethiopian nation was never colonised, it experienced the pain of political pressure when the Italians invaded it to colonise it. The Ethiopians also suffered under the leadership of the oppressive Derg regime. The use of violence by Mengiste's heroes is reflective of Fanon's (1963) assertion that "the native's violence unifies the people" (p. 94) and "those bayonets and cannonades [used by the oppressor] only serve to reinforce [the oppressed people's] aggressiveness" (p. 71). The preceding highlights that violence is used differently by both the oppressor and the oppressed. The Italian invaders and the Derg regime, who represent the oppressor, employ violence in order to force the Ethiopian masses to submit under colonial and dictatorship rule in Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* respectively.

On the other hand, instead of succumbing to either harsh colonial or dictatorship rule, the oppressed Ethiopian masses also use violence to resist and liberate themselves from political oppression. Violence, therefore, features as an experience that the characters are subjected to but also as a tool that they harness to resist this subjection to brutality. The study also hinges on Karl Marx's concept of alienation. Marx (2003) postulates that "under capitalism the worker and the product of his labour are separated, which ultimately leads to alienated labour" (p.7). He further opines that in a capitalist society, there is a difference between the "capitalists who own the property and industrial houses and the proletariat who are property less" (Marx, 2003, p. 6). This information is vital in exploring factors that drive the heroes to engage in heroic deeds.

Heroes are grouped into various categories, namely, bureaucratic, martyrs, warrior/military and superheroes, among others. I observe that Mengiste's heroes belong to the types of warriors, martyrs and superheroes. Warrior heroes are "typically military leaders who lead a nation or group of people during a time of difficulties such as war or disaster and they serve to unify a nation, provide a shared vision, and may embody qualities that are seen as necessary for the group's survival" (Franco et al., 2011, p. 102). A superhero is a "fictional character who is endowed with powers that are beyond the laws of nature and uses such power to do miraculous things" (Encyclopaedia Dictionary 2014). Martyred heroes include "religious or political figures who knowingly (sometimes deliberately) put their lives in jeopardy in the service of a cause or to gain attention to injustice" (Franco et al., 2011, p. 102). Structurally, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section explores Mengiste's attempt to bring to light the heroic deeds and attributes of the female heroes in the primary texts. The second part of the paper analyses the heroic deeds and characteristics of the male heroes in Mengiste's novels. Finally, the last section highlights reasons that lead to the uncelebrated life of the heroes in the primary texts.

### **Uncovering the Heroism of Women in Ethiopia**

Even though some women are celebrated as heroes in Ethiopia, Adugna (2013) admits that some are not celebrated in Ethiopia for various reasons. Nevertheless, she does not clarify much on these reasons. I perceive that Mengiste depicts some female characters as heroines that fight against political oppression in Ethiopia to highlight women's contribution to Ethiopian history in the primary texts. The Ethiopian women are portrayed as warrior heroes as they engage in the heroic deeds of fighting against political oppression.

Mengiste's heroes emerge in a hostile environment. In Mengiste's *The Shadow King*, the Italian invaders used violence to gain political control over Ethiopia. This resonates with Fanon's (1963) argument that "in the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of guns and machines" (p. 40). For instance, the Italians used poison gas in their military tactics against

Ethiopians. Mengiste (2019) writes that “caught between bafflement and horror, Haile Selassie presses himself against his desk and leans into the sturdy wood until he can almost push aside the thoughts of what it means [for Italian invaders] to pour poison gas on human beings [Ethiopians]” (*Shadow King*, p. 121). Poison gas is dangerous because the “chemicals attack the skin provoking the severe blisters and haemorrhages and, as they enter the organism, they cause internal bleeding and peel off the mucous membrane of the bronchial tubes. It may take several excruciating days to die” (Ruibal et al., 2011, p. 55).

Similarly, in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, the Derg regime enacts violence on its citizens by shooting them and mutilating their bodies, among other acts. For instance, a young boy is shot by the police during protests. Hailu, a medical doctor in the novel, observes that “the hole in the boy’s back was a punctured, burned blast of muscle and flesh” (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 6). Such graphic imagery draws the reader’s attention to the brutality of the Derg regime. It is, therefore, not surprising that Ethiopian women warrior heroes employ violence to fight and resist political oppression. This concurs with Fanon’s (1963) assertion that “at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force; it frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (p. 94). Fanon posits the controversial view that people should engage in violence in order to overcome colonisation because violence is the only language the colonisers understand. From Fanon’s perspective, I read the use of violence by the Ethiopian heroines like Hirut and Aster, in their fight against Italian soldiers as their way of resisting and fighting against Italian colonial domination over Ethiopia. As one critic notes, the novel shows how “[t]he women want to do more than bear children and be comforts to soldiers; they desire to fight side- by side- with the men. In other words, they want to be more than what the world expects of them” (Newson, 2022, p. 2). Other critics note similar points about the gender dimension of the novel, noting that it “celebrates the role of women in the Ethiopian resistance” (Capossela, 2019, p. 1) and “captures the valuable contribution of the gallant heroes who were part of the natural army that defeated the invading Colonial Italian army in Ethiopia” (Musinguzi, 2021, p. 1).

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Aster is portrayed as a warrior hero as she plays significant roles in the fight against political oppression. Through a situational irony we learn that Aster confronts an Italian soldier:

“Carlo turns to his men stark eyed and shocked at him. Tell them about this. Tell them what I did. Then he [Carlo Fucelli] turns to find himself facing Aster, her rifle aimed perfectly not for his heart, but for the flesh of his stomach. She [Aster] pulls the trigger. The bullet is a fist in his gut.” (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 352).

The situational irony is depicted in the sense that while Colonel Carlo Fucelli is busy praising himself for his military prowess in fighting against Ethiopian soldiers and telling his fellow Italian soldiers to convey a message about his military achievements to other people, little does he know that he is at the mercy of Aster who is ready to shoot him. Despite his military expertise, Carlo Fucelli fails to defend himself from the fearless Aster. Fanon (1963) posits that “at long last the native, gun in hand, stands face to face with the only forces which contend for his life- the forces of colonialism” (p. 58). In congruence with Fanon’s assertion, Aster with the aid of her gun employs violence to shoot Italian soldiers like Colonel Fucelli, who represents the powers of colonialism, in her bid to defend Ethiopia from being colonised. She displays the heroic attributes of courage and patriotism as she charges against the Italian soldiers fearlessly to defend and protect the freedom and integrity of Ethiopia.

Hirut and Aster are further depicted as warrior heroes who guard the Shadow King, Minim. Minim is “guarded by two soldiers named Aster and Hirut who stand on either side of him, an example to all of Ethiopian’s women” (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 217). The aforementioned supports the idea that Hirut and Aster are patriotic and courageous as they risk their lives to guard the acting Emperor, whom the Italian soldiers also target. More importantly, it supports the argument regarding Mengiste’s attempts to highlight the role of women as national soldiers, taking part even in military action. The guards of the emperor would not stand out as heroes to the same extent as the emperor himself. Kidane, an army commander,

refers to Hirut and Aster as the “daughters of our Empress Taitu who once led forty thousand against these *ferenjoch* [Italian soldiers] the first time they invaded forty years ago” (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 221). This is an allusion to warrior heroic deeds of Empress Taitu who is praised and honoured in Ethiopia for leading an “army of about 5000 infantry and 600 men [fighting against Italian soldiers] at the battle of Adwa” (Adugna, 2013, p.13). I read Mengiste’s reference of Aster and Hirut as the daughters of Empress Taitu as her way of underscoring the fact that ordinary Ethiopian women who engage in warrior heroic deeds like Aster during the Second-Italo Ethiopian war have to be recognised and celebrated just like Empress Taitu is honoured in Ethiopia.

Aster’s warrior heroism is also depicted as she plays the role of an army commander to her fellow Ethiopian women. She devotes herself to training them in military tactics. Aster says, “I’ll teach every woman how to make gunpowder. I’ll teach all of you how to shoot a gun. You have to know how to run toward them unafraid” (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 106). These trained women can be read as warrior heroes as they participate in the war by making gunpowder and fighting against the Italian soldiers. They portray the heroic attributes of courage, sacrifice and patriotism, confidently risking their lives in fighting against the Italian soldiers for the public good of Ethiopia. In a patriarchal society, women are regarded as weak, which is part of the “cultural conceptions of ‘female’ as nurturing and life-giving [...] the antithesis of concepts synonymous with conflict such as aggression, violence and destruction” (Veale, 2003, p. 7).

I read Mengiste’s depiction of Aster’s, Hirut’s and the Ethiopian women’s (who are trained by Aster) participation in war as a way of deconstructing the socially constructed view of regarding Ethiopian women as weak and “poor, oppressed, ravaged by wars and natural calamities, famished, illiterate and starving, with multiple skeletal children and in urgent need of emergency aid” (Maula, 2022, p. 11). Simultaneously, Mengiste attempts to bring to light the women’s contribution to fighting against political oppression in Ethiopian history. This novelist’s writing “attempts to revise international views of a history that is often ignored or seen

through a male and European gaze” (Breen, 2021, p. 129). Likewise, Gagiano (2021) observes that Mengiste attempts to correct a misrepresented history of Ethiopia in her novel, *The Shadow King*. Gagiano (2021) elaborates that “Mengiste describes her belated discovery of female participation in war against a vastly better-resourced and larger army by her great- grandmother” (p. 42). The highlighting of women’s contributions is a step in correcting the misrepresented history of a nation. This helps in presenting a picture of the reality of the women’s contributions and their significance during the Second Italo-Ethiopian war.

Mengiste has a way of mythologizing heroes so that their stories spread in folktale fashion among the people, and in the process, attain hyperbolic features. Aster is one of the characters who is depicted in a mythological fashion. Through visual imagery, Aster is described as a mythical figure, “a madwoman [Aster] on a wild horse blazing through the hills, she is stopping at every church and shouting into the heavens and calling wrathful angels down to earth” (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 65). The precursory reveals that Aster is portrayed as a superhero who can invoke supernatural powers, in this case, the angelic legions, to help her fight against political oppression by visiting her wrath upon the Italian invaders. The hyperbolic image of fire supports her supernatural ability as Aster is depicted riding on a horse, aflame in the hills. The idea of invoking the magical powers to achieve something great is also reflected in the portrayal of heroes in Greek mythology. For instance, Achilles is endowed with superhuman strength that helps him to emerge victorious during the Trojan War. Ultimately, women recognise Aster inspires and orders them to take part in the war (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 65). Aster’s heroism is further portrayed through her bravery and resilience, as she can travel alone without fear in the hills and at night.

Mengiste brings out the solidarity theme among the Ethiopian warrior heroes. She reveals that the female heroes do not only unite among themselves but also unite with the male warrior heroes in fighting against political oppression. The Ethiopian women and male characters are portrayed as warrior heroes as they use violence. For instance, they use guns to fight against political oppression in

Ethiopia. However, it is also significant to note that the heroism is not couched in violence alone. It is also displayed through other activities that are not associated with violence. For example, the women provide necessities like water and food to their fellow Ethiopian male soldiers. Veale (2003) observes that “females within fighting forces typically perform tasks that are gender stereotypical for women in their society such as cooking, cleaning, and being porters” (p. 6). The women also provide medical care to the wounded soldiers. For instance, Hirut is portrayed as a hero as she works “without a break to tend to the wounded [...] and has spent sleepless nights cleaning and wrapping bandages and mixing powders” (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 115), all within the war zone and at odd hours. This justifies her patriotism and dedication to ensuring that the soldiers recover quickly to return to the battlefield. In so doing, Hirut helps Ethiopia in fighting against political oppression indirectly.

In *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, Sara's heroism is portrayed as she unites with Dawit, a warrior hero, in fighting against political oppression under the Derg regime. Veale (2003) asserts that “the contribution of women as fighters in the liberation struggle against Mengistu's Derg regime is almost legendary. It is widely regarded that fighter women were stronger, if not stronger, than the men, and played a critical role in the success of the movement” (p. 17). I read Mengiste's depiction of women like Sara as her way of bringing out the unsung female heroes, thereby correcting a misrepresented history of Ethiopia. Soldiers arrest, torture, and even kill people who revolt against political oppression and violence. The soldiers exemplify what Althusser (1971) calls the repressive state apparatus that the government uses to coerce people to be submissive to it. In the novel, we are told that people suspected to be rebels against the Derg regime are often killed, and their bodies left in the streets in disgrace. When she joins the resisting factions, Sara's heroism emerges through her participation in the risky political assignment of collecting dead bodies and identifying their relatives so that they may be given a befitting burial. Her action of collecting dead bodies is a form of resistance against political oppression since the government forbids people from doing so.

Mengiste portrays female heroes who get tortured and even killed in their fight against political oppression in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. A woman who passes pamphlets to stir up the masses to rebel against the oppressive ways of the Derg gets murdered. Mengiste presents an example of the brutal scene through visual imagery:

“A girl knotted in tight ropes was dumped in Yekatit 12 Martyrs Square. Her skirt was lashed to her legs with rope that dug into her wrists and her ankles. And brought her limbs to an unnatural point. Students gathered around her, their fear carefully draped. Dawit could count her ribs through her bloodied shirt. He remembered her, Ilita” (*Beneath*, 2010, p. 172).

This depicts Ilita as a martyr who displays heroic attributes of courage and patriotism as she puts her life in danger and eventually loses it to liberate the masses from political oppression. Tembo (2020) observes that Mengiste depicts female characters to make known women's contribution to the building of Ethiopia. One of the soldiers warns the public who are gazing at Ilita's body that “she's a lesson to all of you. And there will be others unless all of these anarchists stop their bourgeois assaults” (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 172). The soldiers employ brutal force as they torture and murder people who rebel against the Derg regime like Ilita in order to intimidate the rest of the populace.

It is worth noting that the domestic space provides a good platform in nurturing heroes in Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. Selam, Hailu's wife, plays a crucial role of nurturing the heroic attributes of courage, resilience and inculcating a fighting spirit in her child, Dawit. Ngumbi (2015) asseverates that Selam is depicted as the “parental and familial figure that inspires and nurtures a revolutionary spirit in Dawit (p. 180). Tembo (2020) postulates that “it is Selam who leads Dawit to believe that he comes from a family of great fighters” (p. 6). Mengiste (2010) writes that Selam “would understand in a way no one else in his family could, she would remind him [Dawit] that in his veins ran the blood of her father, one of Gondra's fiercest, and she would tell him that hope can never come from doing nothing” (p. 30). The fruit of Selam's effort in nurturing

heroic attributes in her child is depicted as Dawit performs warrior heroic deeds through his fight against oppression perpetuated by the Derg regime. For instance, Mengiste (2010) presents a hyperbolic violent murder scene where Dawit “twisted the soldier’s neck, surprised by its pliancy, its snap muffled by his startled gasp. The soldier slumped to the ground” (p. 230). This depicts Dawit as a superhero as he is endowed with superhuman strength and bravery in how he murders a soldier with his bare hands.

### **Unveiling the Forgotten Male Warrior Hero**

In the primary texts, Mengiste portrays male characters who engage in heroic deeds through their fight against political oppression. Some of these heroes’ heroic deeds and attributes are explored in this section. Nevertheless, despite their contribution to Ethiopia, these heroes are not celebrated in their nation. In both novels, the male heroes spring out of a vicious atmosphere. According to Fanon, physical violence “refers to the use of military and police power to conquer and ‘pacify’ indigenous peoples and to force them to accept colonial order” (Kalisa, 2009, p. 8). The Italian soldiers and the Derg regime use physical violence in both texts to exercise political domination.

In *The Shadow King*, the male warriors fight against the Italian invaders. Like the female warrior heroes, the Ethiopian male warriors also employ violence in their fight against the Italian invaders. For instance, Seifu is depicted as a warrior hero as he launches violent attacks on the Italian Colonel Fucelli on two occasions. The family space provides a fertile ground for making of heroes in a way that makes heroes fight against the oppressive power in an image of family revenge. This is reflected in Seifu’s life as he tortures Colonel Fucelli as an act of vengeance for the death of his son, Tariku, whom the Italian soldiers murder. Seifu intentionally enacts physical torture, intending to leave Fucelli to suffer for the rest of his life. The scene of his torture exemplifies this violence:

His [Carlo Fucelli’s] belt is loosened, his trousers unbuttoned, his undershorts yanked down. He tries to jerk free and the knife pokes into his thigh

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so quickly it is cold as the blade tip emerges. It glides down the tender crease of his pubis. It nuzzles the split curve of his buttocks, then inches toward his anus. Carlo freezes, held hostage and trembling in anticipation. (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 229).

The above stated imagery reveals that the result of this torture is not only physical mutilation but also mental trauma. It substantiates the fact that Seifu is a warrior hero who employs violence in resisting and fighting against political oppression. Seifu exhibits heroic attributes of courage and patriotism as he confidently invades the Italian army camp and attacks their army commander, Fucelli, to avenge his son's death and defend Ethiopia from being colonised. He enacts physical violence on Colonel Fucelli, cutting parts of his body with a sharp knife. Consequentially, Fucelli feels excruciating pain all over his body and begins to feel cold as his blood gushes out. Seifu's use of violence concurs with Fanon's (1963) contention that "violence because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities" (p. 93). Indeed, the above evidence attests to Seifu's creativity in mutilating Colonel Fucelli.

In another violent scene, Seifu kills Colonel Fucelli by stabbing him with a sharp knife. Hirut later "finds Carlo's dead body, a tattered handkerchief draped over his swollen face and neck, his belt and bloody trousers gaping open, his legs spread wide" (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 355). Seifu's act of violence augurs well with Fanon's idea that "decolonisation could only occur successfully when the colonised not only seized their freedom through a liberation struggle but participated in violent action to expunge the colonial heritage of inferiority and submission" (Kalisa, 2009, p. 10). Seifu's violence is his way of fighting for the freedom of Ethiopia and his refusal (and that of the Ethiopians) to submit and be looked down upon by the Italian soldiers.

Dawit and the Ethiopian masses are portrayed as warrior heroes who employ violence in fighting against political oppression propelled by the Derg regime. For instance, we learn that Dawit and Anbessa use guns to launch a violent attack on the Derg regime to kill its leader and replace the oppressive government with a better

one. From the novel's onset, Dawit is portrayed as a courageous hero who fights against corruption, oppression and high cost of living under the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. With the help of Dawit and the Ethiopian masses, Emperor Haile Selassie gets deposed and a new government known as the Derg assumes power. Dawit and the Ethiopians hope that "All those ministers he [Emperor] made rich should be charged with a crime! That's what a new government will fix. These rich elites are nothing but traitors to their people" (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 56). This denotes that Dawit and the Ethiopian masses hope the new government will serve them sincerely and truthfully.

Nevertheless, the Derg regime became more oppressive, corrupt and people languish in poverty. From a Marxist perspective, this caused Dawit and the Ethiopian masses to become economically and politically alienated from the Derg regime. This is because, irrespective of investing their effort in booting out Emperor Haile Selassie's corrupt and oppressive regime, they are still unable to enjoy the fruits of their labour, like being prosperous and free from the bondage of economic and political oppression. Consequently, Dawit and the Ethiopians revolt against the autocratic reign of the Derg regime.

The domestic space plays a significant role in the making of heroes. Yonas's heroism is depicted as he beats one of the Derg soldiers looking for Dawit in their home. While searching for Dawit, one of the soldiers beats Sara, Yona's wife. Consequentially, Yonas becomes furious, and in his effort to defend and avenge his wife and protect Dawit from being found by the soldiers, he engages in a physical battle with one of the soldiers. We learn that "The soldier was already spinning from the punch before anyone knew what was happening. Yona's next blow sent the soldier careening on top of Tizita and Sara" (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 281). Yona's act of fighting the soldier is his way of fighting against political oppression, as the Derg regime uses the soldiers to oppress the masses. Simultaneously, Hailu also plays a heroic role in fighting against political oppression as he is depicted as having "a pistol, aimed at the soldier's head" (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 282).

Hailu and Yonas do not kill the soldiers but warn them to leave their families in peace and never return.

In her portrayal of male heroes, Mengiste panders to expectations about warrior heroes. The Ethiopian male warriors win the battle against the Italian soldiers who want to colonise them, displaying the heroic association with victory. Kidane leads them as their commander. Kidane and other Ethiopian male warriors like Seifu, Tariku and Dawit portray the heroic attributes of courage, patriotism and sacrifice in their fight against political oppression. However, Kidane's heroism is questionable as he rapes Aster and Hirut. This can be read as a flaw in Kidane's character which makes Hirut loathe him. Mengiste portrays Dawit<sup>1</sup> and Tariku as the first martyr heroes as they die while rendering a noble service of resisting and fighting against political oppression. Tariku is hanged to death by the Italian soldiers, and Dawit dies from an injury he sustained in the war between Italian and Ethiopian soldiers.

### **Uncelebrated Heroes: So Shines a Good Deed in a Weary World**

This section examines factors that lead to the uncelebrated lives of the heroes. These men and women resist and fight against political oppression but are never recognised in their nation. Both the male and female heroes live uncelebrated lives due to various reasons. Mengiste challenges the practice of political leaders of unrecognising the efforts of the ordinary female and male characters who play crucial roles in building Ethiopia. After the Italo-Ethiopian war ended, the common male and female characters who fight against colonial oppression are not honoured for their efforts. This is because they belong to the lower rank of people in the society so they are not regarded as significant people worthy of recognition.

In Mengiste's (2019) *The Shadow King*, we learn that Hirut "can hear the dead growing louder: we must be remembered. We must be known. We will not rest until we have been mourned" (p. 14). The aforesaid presents the lamentation of

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1 Both Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* feature a character by the name of Dawit. Nevertheless, these characters are not necessarily the same and are analysed as different characters in this study.

the Ethiopian dead heroes who are not celebrated because their heroic deeds are neither recognised by the public nor remembered in Ethiopian history. They are not adequately mourned, counter to the norm conferred on people who achieve great things in life when they die. The evidence also foreshadows the voice of the dead Ethiopian heroes Hirut hears at the novel's end. This happens when Hirut meets the emperor, who has fled the palace because people are rebelling against him. Hirut feels the urge to utter the names of the dead Ethiopian heroes in the Emperor's presence to honour and make known their uncelebrated deeds (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 378). She begins to mention the names of the dead Ethiopian heroes, for instance, Kidane and Aster, to mention a few. As Hirut utters the terms of the dead heroes, "she feels them gather around her and urge her on [to say, they] were those who stepped into a country left dark by an invading plague and gave new hope to Ethiopia's people" (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 378). The lamentation cements that the Ethiopian heroes are not celebrated and recognised for their contribution to their nation during their lifetime. Thus, their spirits demand to be celebrated as heroes despite being dead.

The unfamiliarity with the names and deeds of the dead heroes by the new Ethiopian generation further reveals that these heroes are indeed uncelebrated. While searching for Hirut, Ettore asks the people if they know Hirut, the "girl who once fought with the great Aster" (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 362). To his surprise, the new Ethiopian generation is not familiar with the names of Hirut and Aster, nor are they familiar with their heroic deeds. Mengiste (2019) writes that, Ettore "waited to hear about Aster, but there was nothing" (*Shadow King*, p. 362). The ignorance by the new Ethiopian generation of the names and heroic deeds of the living hero, Hirut, and the dead heroes like Aster is quite absurd and speaks to the effort undertaken by writers such as Mengiste to highlight the roles taken by otherwise unknown characters. It is worth noting that Ettore bears a box that has pictures of some of the dead Ethiopian heroes killed during the war between Italians and Ethiopians. Like the novel, the trunk serves the same function of unearthing Ethiopian hidden history as it is a storage that brings to memory the life of uncelebrated heroes. Upon looking at the box, it reminds Hirut

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of the marvellous heroic deeds carried out by the heroes. It is also a reminder of Ethiopian heroes' suffering during the war.

Additionally, some of the heroes are also uncelebrated because they are female. It is difficult for female heroes to be recognised and appreciated in a society dominated by patriarchal stereotypes, in which men regard themselves as superior and women as inferior. Ethiopian women who participated in the war "saw themselves as fighting for political justice, development and social progress including gender equality" (Veale, 2003, p. 18). In Mengiste's *The Shadow King*, Kidane who embodies patriarchal ideals forbids Ethiopian women from being on the frontline of the battle because he regards them as weak and incapable of using guns to fight against the Italian invaders. Aster and Hirut are among the women Kidane forbids to combat directly against the Italian invaders. Kidane tells Hirut that the "gun is not yours! What have you done? She shakes her head. She does not expect the hard slap [from Kidane] that seems to land on both sides of her feet at once [...] He [Kidane] grabs the Wujigra and strides away" (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 131-132). The precursory reveals that patriarchal ideals distort Kidane as he deems women incapable of using a gun to fight against the Italian invaders. He takes away the gun from Hirut so that he can give it to a male soldier whom he thinks is capable of using the gun in fighting against the Italian invaders.

Nevertheless, with time, Ethiopian women like Hirut and Aster defy Kidane's order and engage in direct combat against the Italians. Contrary to Kidane's patriarchal perspective, Aster and Hirut prove that women can perform well in battle by using war weapons like guns to kill Italian soldiers. Although women like Aster and Hirut engage in warrior deeds in this patriarchal society, their achievement is hardly noticed and talked about. They are not applauded nor recognised for their contribution as people's mind-sets are distorted with patriarchal ideals that women are inferior and they do not expect anything heroic to come out from them.

Similarly, in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, Sara is chosen to take part in collecting the dead bodies not necessarily because the underground movement has the

trust that she can do it but because they think no one will suspect that she is doing it (collecting the dead bodies) which will provide safety to the revolutionary underground movement. Veale (2003) opines that “women fighters determination for combat had its apparent contribution to a more radical and military ardour of the liberation movement” (p. 17). However, although women characters achieve great things, their achievements are not recognised because many people’s mind-sets are distorted by patriarchal stereotypes that women are inferior. Their heroic deeds also do not spread because people hardly accept and talk about women’s achievements.

Additionally, Sara’s heroism is not celebrated because not many people know her underground heroic deed of collecting the dead bodies. The fact that she executes this task of carrying dead bodies at night is a significant factor that makes her heroic deed unknown to many people. This is because many people sleep at night so they can hardly notice her engaging in such risky heroic action. Moreover, the Derg regime introduced curfews at midnight (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 127) forbidding people from moving up and down at night. This further enhances Sara’s action of collecting dead bodies at night to sink into obscurity. As a result, people do not honour and celebrate her life because they are incognizant of her heroic deeds. Similarly, in Mengiste’s *The Shadow King*, the female heroes are also not recognised because they perform their heroic deeds in silence. For instance, the women who provide food, water and take care of the wounded soldiers are not celebrated (Mengiste, *Shadow King*, 2019, p. 92). Thus, Mengiste attempts to bring out the heroic deeds of women by fictionalising history in the primary texts.

In Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze*, the failure of the Derg regime to understand and see beyond the reasons behind the Ethiopians’ protests is a driving factor that leads to the uncelebrated lives of these heroes. Rather than being recognised or awarded for their heroic deeds, these characters face persecution. Dawit and Anbessa use violence as an attempt to force the Derg regime to stop their practice of ruling the Ethiopian masses with an iron fist. The Derg regime failed to appreciate the reasons behind the violent attacks propelled by the Ethiopian

heroes. Consequently, instead of changing their oppressive system of leadership, the Derg regime began to arrest, murder and persecute Ethiopian heroes as well as anyone else they deem rebellious. The Derg regime reacts violently after Anbessa's and Dawit's violent attack. Mengiste (2010) writes that "All of Addis Ababa erupted in chaos. Doors were torn off hinges, sons pulled from homes and shot, daughters raped, men and women hanged in public squares" (*Beneath*, p. 274). This is reminiscent of Tegegn's (2012) observation that "selected prisoners condemned to execution were taken away by night from detention centres to a forested area called Kotebe, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, and executed by firing squad" (p. 253). These oppressive and violent attacks are enacted on Ethiopian heroes and citizens by the repressive state apparatus, the soldiers.

This category of uncelebrated heroes also includes all the tortured political protesters and others who died during the protests. Just as they do with Anbessa's and Dawit's attacks, the Derg regime fails again to see the reasons behind the protesters' revolts. Instead of amending its oppressive ways, the Derg regime tortures and even murders the political protesters. One Colonel's daughter gets arrested and tortured because of helping pass out pamphlets deemed rebellious (Mengiste, *Beneath*, 2010, p. 26). The idea of resilience in fighting against political oppression is reflected by the "courage and determination that motivates these students [and other protestors], in the face of lethal bullets" (Lipenga, 2014, p. 93). Indeed, the heroes are not afraid to lose their lives while fighting against political oppression, but once they die, the memory of their deeds risks being forgotten. Writers such as Mengiste are, therefore, significant as they bring to mind the heroic deeds of the uncelebrated heroes in their texts. The people who die in the process of fighting against political oppression can be read as uncelebrated martyr heroes..

## Conclusion

Overall, the study has discussed the heroic deeds and different reasons that lead to the uncelebrated lives of Ethiopian heroic characters in the novels under study. The paper reveals that Mengiste brings to light the heroic deeds of both male and female heroes by fictionalising history in the primary texts. Without a

doubt, these characters portrayed in Mengiste's novels are indeed heroes as they fit in a "network of people that take action on behalf of others in need, or defence of integrity or a moral cause" [fighting against political oppression] (Kohen, 2010, p. 45). The paper further unveils that people may become uncelebrated although they engage in heroic deeds that can benefit the whole nation. Literature plays a crucial role in uncovering the hidden history of the heroic deeds of the uncelebrated heroes and inspiring readers of literature to cultivate the virtues of bravery and resilience, among others. Zimbardo (2007) concurs that "we care about heroic stories because they serve as powerful reminders that people are capable of resisting evil, of not giving in to temptations, of rising above mediocrity, and of heeding the call to action and to service when others fail to act" (p. 461). Indeed, heroic stories inspire readers to carry out heroic tasks to overcome life challenges..

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There is no conflict of interest.

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