Gallego, Mar (2025): Reconstructing a Matriarchal Kingdom: Empowerment and Female Bonding in Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones*. *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación*, Vol. XXXVII, 77-91
ISSN 1697-7750 · E-ISSN 2340-4981
DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

Reconstructing a Matriarchal Kingdom: Empowerment and Female Bonding in Namina Forna's *The Gilded Ones*

Reconstruyendo un reino matriarcal: Empoderamiento y Sororidad en *The Gilded Ones* de Namina Forna

MAR GALLEGO[1]
COIDESO, UNIVERSIDAD DE HUELVA
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5518-7667

Artículo recibido el / *Article received*: 2024-06-11
Artículo aceptado el / *Article accepted*: 2025-02-12

ABSTRACT: Namina Forna's debut novel *The Gilded Ones* (2021) has been widely acclaimed as a dystopian novel where the author creates an imaginary ancestral world in which young girls who are considered "impure" by the sanctioned social precepts of the time are severely punished and even killed. The only option left for these girls is to join an army of Alaki (impure women) in order to defend the ancient kingdom of Otera from the attack of brutal deathshrieks who are invading their land. In the fantasy scenario of the kingdom of Otera Namina Forna manages to enact the clash between the opposite patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies and values, which allegedly have been fighting for hegemony for centuries in that territory. Through the use of a combination of fantasy, Afrofuturism and feminist dystopia, Forna's novel explicitly articulates not only that eternal confrontation between two worldviews and their ensuing plethora of consequences and derivations, but also the challenges involved in undermining male dominance and superiority and projecting an alternative reality based on love and equality. By focusing on the crucial role of female bonding and empowerment, the author is able to imagine and grant credibility to another way of shaping gender roles and mandates that clearly defy conventional patriarchal structures and emphasize the importance of a culture of peace and hope.

[1] The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the State Investigation Agency and the FEDER, EU (Research Project "Resisting Capitalocene: Narratives of Hope in the 21st Century", PID 2023-147494NB-I00) for the writing of this article.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

Key words: Young Adult Fantasy Fiction, Afrofuturism, Feminist Dystopia, Gender critique, Patriarchy, Matriarchy, Hope.

RESUMEN: La primera novela de Namina Forna *The Gilded Ones* (2021) ha sido aclamada como una novela distópica en la que la autora crea un mundo imaginario ancestral donde las chicas jóvenes que son consideradas "impuras" por los preceptos sociales establecidos en esa época son castigadas severamente e incluso asesinadas. La única opción que tienen estas jóvenes es unirse a un ejército Alaki (mujeres impuras) para defender el reino remoto de Otera del ataque de los brutales mortaulladores que están invadiendo su tierra. En el escenario fantástico del reino de Otera Namina Forna es capaz de representar el choque entre las ideologías y valores opuestos del patriarcado y matriarcado, que supuestamente han estado luchando por la hegemonía durante siglos en ese territorio. A través del uso de una combinación de fantasía, Afrofuturismo y distopía feminista, la novela de Forna articula explícitamente no solo la confrontación eterna entre estas dos cosmovisiones y la consiguiente plétora de consecuencias y derivaciones, sino también los desafíos que conlleva socavar la dominación y superioridad masculinas y proyectar una realidad alternativa basada en el amor y la igualdad. Centrándose en el papel crucial de la sororidad y el empoderamiento, la autora consigue imaginar y darle credibilidad a otra forma de definir los roles y mandatos de género que claramente constituye un reto para las estructuras patriarcales y enfatiza la importancia de una cultura de paz y esperanza.

Palabras clave: Ficción fantástica juvenil, Afrofuturismo, Distopía feminista, Crítica de género, Patriarcado, Matriarcado, Esperanza.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Are We Girls or Are We Demons?"
"Are We Going to Die or Survive?"
(Namina Forna, *The Gilded Ones*)

Namina Forna's debut novel *The Gilded Ones* (2021) has been widely acclaimed as a dystopian novel where the author creates an imaginary ancestral world in which young girls who are considered "impure" by the sanctioned social precepts of the time are severely punished and even killed. The only option left for these girls is to join an army of Alaki (impure women) in order to defend the ancient kingdom of Otera from the attack of brutal deathshrieks who are invading their land. In this fantasy scenario Forna manages to enact the clash between the opposite patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies and values, which allegedly have been fighting for hegemony for centuries in that territory. Through the use of a combination of young adult fantasy, Afrofuturism and feminist dystopia, Forna's novel explicitly articulates not only that eternal confrontation between two worldviews and their ensuing plethora of consequences and derivations, but also the challenges involved in undermining male dominance and superiority and projecting an alternative reality based on love and equality. By focusing on the crucial role of female bonding and empowerment, the author is able to imagine and grant credibility to another way of shaping gender roles and mandates that clearly defy

conventional patriarchal structures and emphasize the importance of a culture of peace and hope.

2. YOUNG ADULT FANTASY FICTION AND AFROFUTURISM

Allegedly a young adult book, this novel certainly belongs to the aesthetic mode of speculative fiction, blurring the distinctions among traditional genre divisions drawing from fantasy, Afrofuturism and feminist dystopia, all of them wrapped up in this extremely well-written and illuminating book. Forna introduces herself as a "young adult fantasy author" (naminaforna.com), and the book is defined as a "West-African inspired, feminist fantasy," which is part of a trilogy together with *The Merciless Ones* (2022) and *The Eternal Ones* (2024). In "A Letter from Namina" included in the book, the author explains how she wanted to "create heroes that can be all of us" (414), addressing her young readers and telling them: "you are the hero of your own story. You can make things happen, and you can change the world. Choose to change the world for good" (415). The novel thus contains a very powerful message urging young readers to look for social justice and change, thus empowering them to act. Indeed, the novel narrates an epic quest, in which the protagonist Deka and the other Alaki female soldiers will face the most horrendous battles with "hideous and inhuman creatures" to serve the Emperor, where the only possibility is to die or to survive. However, as the novel progresses, uncertainty about those "monsters" will pave the way to the uncovering of buried secrets and wonderful and unexpected discoveries.

More specifically, I would firstly argue that the book can be read as an example of young adult fantasy, following the interest sparked by *Children of Blood and Bone* and *Black Panther*, as the author admitted in an interview: "I initially wrote TFO in 2012, but it went nowhere. People told me no one would buy a book with a Black main character . . . Then came 2018. When I saw the reception Black Panther was getting, I knew the time was right" ("Namina Forna," 2021). In the same interview, she also justifies why she wrote it: "When you grow up never seeing yourself in the world around you, there's this hunger to be seen, to be acknowledged . . . Growing up, it felt like Black people were the unwanted stepchild in scifi/fantasy, and in real life, for that matter." The author insists on this idea in the interview: "But also, for me, growing up as a Black person, I could never see myself in a fantasy book. And the thing is like, fantasy, these are the heroic tales of people of culture, so how you position your culture's fantasy dictates how you see yourself as a culture" ("Namina Forna," 2021). Clearly the lack of role models and positive representations of Black people in speculative fiction is one of the reasons behind the writing of this book, which was undoubtedly encouraged by the success of Black Panther movies.

Within speculative fiction, the novel can be ascribed to Afrofuturistic fiction because it presents some of the main features of this subgenre also found in Black Panther movies. According to Nadja Sayej, Afrofuturism has a long history that can be traced back to the speculative futurist fiction by W.E.B. DuBois, Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins or Sutton E. Griggs at the turn of the nineteenth century, but also to popular musicians such as George Clinton, Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott and Janelle Monáe (2018). Indeed, Afrofuturism was already known in the decade of the 1950s with the work of Sun Ra, who popularized the movement even before the term was coined in the 1990s (Sayej, 2018). Needless to say, Afrofuturism experienced a great popularity in the late twentieth

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

century thanks to the works of Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, especially the latter writer being clearly a source of inspiration for Forna.

Perhaps more importantly, I would contend that Afrofuturism is extremely useful to deal with complicated issues such as the legacy of slavery, or what critic Saidiya Hartman has termed "the afterlife of slavery," that is, the persisting effects of Black enslavement and its traumatic and terrible effects that continue to plague African Americans in the U.S. up to today.[2] Moreover, Afrofuturism serves as a suitable springboard to interrogate notions of race, gender, and class discrimination, among others, by projecting an alternative world in which those realities are even exacerbated. Thus, Afrofuturism also reveals the haunting traumas of the past, while imagining other future possible societies, and, consequently, past and future are clearly intertwined. Jamil Smith also suggests that the additional appeal of Afrofuturism lies in the fact that it conveys "an ethos that fuses African mythologies, technology and science fiction and serves to rebuke conventional depictions of . . . a future bereft of black people" (2018: 9). Hence, Afrofuturistic fiction claims the central role of Black people in any envisioning of future worlds.

What I also find compelling about approaching the novel from an Afrofuturistic standpoint is precisely the intention of this subgenre to negate the colonial look about Africa and its people. As Myron Strong and Sean Chaplin note, Afrofuturism provides "an alternate narrative for understanding the black experience" across the African diaspora (2019: 58). Contrary to the very limited hegemonic vision of Africa imposed by the colonial white imagination, or what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has famously phrased as "the dangers of a single story," this novel partakes of an Afrofuturistic interest in addressing the important role of African empires, in this case of the ancestral kingdom of Otera. It is also insightful the way in which the novel formulates life in this kingdom showing the differences between rural and urban areas, so as to deconstruct the homogeneous vision of African countries as backward, agricultural, and pagan. In fact, the novel is intent on describing a very diverse and multicultural kingdom composed by the Northern, the Eastern, the Western and the Southern provinces, each of them with different languages and traditions.

However, it is true that the novel cannot be regarded as strictly Afrofuturistic, because some definitory features of the subgenre such as time travel, advanced technology or alien abductions are not present in this work. But I would content that this seems to be an intentional strategy on the part of the author, who makes use of those Afrofuturistic characteristics that may help to put forward her message to her young readership, especially regarding the crucial connection to the past, the fostering of black pride, and the important historical role played by Black people to propose an alternative future where Black people are not merely victims but, instead, active agents of change for social justice and equality. Thus, Forna's novel foregrounds some key Afrofuturistic elements, concretely the emphasis on heroism, the recovery of African traditional beliefs and value systems, and the characters' supernatural abilities. Firstly, the novel is populated by an army of Alaki, impure women rejected by their families and communities, who are obliged to be deeply committed to the Emperor, guided by core values such as honor and patriotism which turn them into heroic figures ready to do what

[2] For a rich and comprehensive study of the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, see *Pathologizing Black Bodies. The Legacy of Plantation Slavery*, by Constante González Groba, Ewa Barbara Luczak and Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis (2023).

it takes in order to survive. Their motto is quite telling: "Are we going to die or survive?" (155). They discover very soon that the only way to survive is to be trained as the elite army of soldiers, considered as true heroines: "Welcome, Death Strikers" (265) is how the people in the city welcome them after the battles.

Secondly, the author uses the novel as an interesting platform to deal with West African settings and traditional customs. In the case of the setting, the author mentions how she was inspired by her native Sierra Leone landscape:

> The capital city of Hemaira is based on Freetown, the city I grew up in, hence the waterfalls and all the hills. The walls of Hemaira are based on the walls of Benin, which were once four times the size of the Great Wall of China, but were destroyed by the British, along with most of the city.
>
> ("Namina Forna," 2021)

Indeed, some of the crucial elements in the story are directly drawn from her native culture like the masks: "The masks. There's a reason why people wear masks in my world. Sierra Leonean culture is mask culture. For every event, people wear masks to commune with or acknowledge the sacred. I took that idea and twisted it" ("Namina Forna," 2021). Forna makes use of this traditional feature to highlight the imposed nature of the masks on women, therefore coding masks as another patriarchal obligation women have to submit to, but marketed as a protection mechanism, even as an honor bestowed upon them.

A third Afrofuturistic characteristic is the characters' supernatural abilities. This feature can be related to Mark Dery's notion of the "technologies of the sacred" (1994: 210) in his seminal book *Flame Wars*, a notion originally coined by Jerome Rosenberg. One of the starting premises of that publication is the "cultural destruction" (191) that Black people have suffered from in the U.S., which Dery summarizes as follows: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (191). A very legitimate question which triggers an enlightening conversation where Afrofuturism is tied up to the spiritual traditions of African belief systems and syncretic religious practices such as santeria, voodoo, hoodoo, macumba, etc. Borrowing from those traditions, many Afrodiasporic characters exhibit supernatural abilities in Afrofuturistic fiction. In the novel the impure women are endowed with many supernatural powers such as superior strength, repeated survival to all kinds of death or night vision, among many others. For instance, the protagonist Deka has been able to survive multiple and brutal attempts to kill her—beheading, dismemberment, drowning, burning, etc.—, intimating that she may be immortal and exceptional. That is the reason why she is trained to experience a "state of heightened senses": "When you enter the deep combat state, you can see what others can't, feel what others can't—become faster and stronger than is normally possible for an alaki. This is the state you will use to develop your voice" (202). Once she learns to use her voice, she manages to control and paralyze their enemies, the deathshieks.

Therefore, Forna makes use of traditional West African features to recreate the ancient kingdom of Otera as a microcosm to analyze the depiction of a kingdom under the attack of outsiders who allegedly want to destroy it, thus reproducing the historical process of colonization on the one hand, but also narrating the development of an

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

extremely sexist and class-biased society as a result of that process. All of this is textualized at the beginning of the novel as a fight between the forces of the Emperor and the forces of evil represented by the barbaric deathshrieks. Once again this is another tale of confrontation between good and evil, or so it seems. Nevertheless, the clear-cut distinction between good and evil is gradually shaken by the attitudes and actions of each of the players, both in the battlefield and outside, which hint at a possible surprising outcome of the story. I would say that unforeseen turns are also quite characteristic of the Afrofuturistic subgenre.

3. FEMINIST DYSTOPIA AND HOPE

Secondly, the novel is also a feminist dystopia in line with Margaret Atwood's or Octavia Butler's fiction. Indeed, it is very productive to approach the novel through this angle, since it enriches the reading of the different elements that appear in it. Despite the "male bias" that has historically dominated the dystopian tradition (Leganu cited in Desmet 2010: 31), feminist dystopia can be traced back to as early as 1826 with the publication of *The Last Man* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. But the actual explosion of the subgenre takes place in the late 60s and 70s with crucial references such as Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Kate Wilhelm's "Baby You Were Great" (1967), *Heroes and Villains* by Angela Carter, *The Day of the Women* by Pamela Kettle and *The Ship Who Sang* by Anne McCaffrey, published in 1969 (Desmet, 2010: 35), Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978), among many others. Perhaps the best-known classic examples are *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ (1975) and *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976). Jeanne Cortiel acknowledges the connection with male dystopian fiction, but also reflects on the main aims of feminist dystopia:

> The feminist dystopia has discernible roots in the foundational texts of this tradition, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). While these novels record the failure of their protagonists to overcome what makes their societies dystopian – total social control over individual action and thought . . . feminist dystopia extends this critique to draw attention to the ways in which contemporary societies limit the potential of women specifically.
>
> (2015: 156)

In the quote it is clearly emphasized the importance of an intentional gender critique of the patriarchal order as key to unravel feminist dystopia. More concretely, according to Sarah Dillon, feminist dystopic narratives "explore the dominant themes of control of reproductive rights, sexual and other forms of violence against women, and the balance of power between the sexes" (2020: 169). Forna's novel nicely fits in this depiction of feminist dystopia, since it tackles the three main themes mentioned above: the control over reproductive rights is so well established that only "pure" women can become mothers, and the "impure" ones are regarded as unsuitable, even dangerous mothers; the novel documents many forms of gender violence targeting women, more radically so in the case of "impure" women; and power issues are prevalent in the story which basically recounts the ancestral confrontation between matriarchal and patriarchal ideologies and its consequences.

Dillon also acknowledges the fact that feminist dystopian narratives have become increasingly more visible and popular in the first decades of the twenty-first century, as the case of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has proved, especially thanks to the adaptation of the novel which premiered in 2017. In addition, she also states that "young adult feminist dystopian fiction is flourishing" (169), and Forna clearly represents that trend with her trilogy. What is more troubling is the controversy that has been generated by the fact that other feminist critics such as Anna Silman and Sarah Ditum criticize this new wave of feminist dystopia, accusing it of being devoid of a necessary critical perspective, and of excessively capitalizing on the "market values of female misery" (Ditum cited in Dillon, 2020: 171). This is a genuine concern, since we witness how female suffering and victimization are turned into an everyday spectacle in our present world, to the point of even proposing gender violence as desirable, likely to be consumed not only in pornography but in other media productions. This is clearly another effect of the "white and male dominant gaze," which constantly reduces violence against women's bodies to a performance for men's benefit.

Besides the controversial aspect of the intolerable display of gender violence, feminist dystopia greatly contributes to challenge the conventional limits of representation, positioning itself on the margins on purpose to be able to subvert traditional patriarchal parameters and expectations. In this sense, feminist dystopia is aligned with what Ellen Friedman expounds: "in subverting the forms of conventional narrative, they subvert the patriarchal social structures these forms reflect. With such structural disruption, the 'woman' in the text is liberated from the secret folds of the fiction and comes to inhabit the entire text" (cited in Mahoney, 1994: 12). Thus, feminist dystopia fiction becomes a potential (and real) site for transgression, very effective to back up "an imagined reconfiguration of the social order, a turning upside down of convention and power relations" (Mahoney, 1994: 14). The blending of the real and the fantastic is another key component that characterizes this genre and, by extension, all speculative fiction, as Elisabeth Mahoney explains: "The feminist dystopia does not only situate itself as marginal through its rewriting of a literary genre, however. It is also part of feminist experimentation with *speculative fictions,* in forms such as the utopia, science fiction and fantasy" (1994: 12; author's emphasis). Therefore, feminist dystopia intends to subvert utopia in order to draw attention to a terrible world which, nonetheless, seems too close to our real one. Accordingly, feminist dystopia introduces a shift in perspective allowing for the female voice and the female self to come forth, deconstructing the unjust history of patriarchal silencing and erasure of women. I would say that, in the case of Black feminist dystopia, this is more evident as a critique of both racist and sexist prejudice aimed at denouncing the historical invisibility of Black women.

As mentioned before, Octavia Butler is without any doubt the best-known writer of African American feminist dystopia. Her work seems to reproduce everyday reality, in fact she confesses that her sources come from the news: "The ugly things in the novels happened because today's dangers—drug use, illiteracy, the popularity of building prisons coupled with the unpopularity of building and maintaining schools and libraries, the yawning rich-poor gaps and global warming—group up to be tomorrow's problems" (1999). As Peter Stillman observes, Butler "writes such a close extrapolation from current trends that her dystopias produce 'a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement' (Dubey 105) in which readers can readily see how our present can lead to these future dystopias and thus be warned about allowing present trends to continue" (2003: 16). I would

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

contend that Forna's novel closely follows in Butler's footsteps, since her dystopia also throws light onto and problematizes existing ideologies and current issues, especially in the *Gilded Ones* focusing on the widespread rise of hostile sexism camouflaged as benevolent sexism.[3]

Additionally, another common trait for these two authors is their recourse to a traditional dystopian strategy that Sargent charts in this quote referring to Butler: "she seeks to 'map, warn, and hope,' where 'to hope' includes to suggest directions towards a better world" (cited in Stillman, 2003: 15). I think that the latter notion of hope is what makes Butler's, and by extension, Forna's work diverge from previous models. As Rachael Sears declares,

> Butler's Parable novels borrow generously from the utopian/dystopian tradition, however, her unique perspective as a female African-American science fiction writer offers new ideas to this well-established genre. Unlike the dystopian authors before her, she leaves her readers with a sense of hope at the end of her novels—there is a chance for humanity yet. Unlike the utopian authors of an early time, Butler's utopia is not well-established; everything is not perfect, not yet.
>
> (2015: 30)

Despite the apocalyptic tone and the presence of extreme violence, Forna's novel also depicts a world where there is hope for women, especially at the end of the book, as it will be detailed later. Although the narration of the dystopic universe of Otera kingdom cannot be described as hopeful as a whole, readers get many glimpses of that future hope when Alaki women are given a chance to survive and thrive, albeit in very grim circumstances.

4. A CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY: RECONSTRUCTING A MATRIARCHAL KINGDOM

As I have stated above, the book is a critique of an extremely sexist and class biased society. So, traditional gender expectations and roles are clearly questioned and finally overturned by the end of the novel. This is one of the main aims of the novel, as Forna literally states: "the book is an examination of patriarchy" (414), and recounts her personal experience to back this up:

> *The Gilded Ones* is a book of my anger about being a woman. Sierra Leone is very patriarchal. [Growing up], there were things I was expected to do as a girl because I was a girl. I come to America and I'm like, "It's gonna be different. America is like the shining beacon." It was the same old, same old, but just more polite. So it's like, "damn, anywhere across the world, you can't escape being a woman, and there's things that happen because you're a woman."
>
> (Long, 2019: 7)

Comparing the patriarchal structures in Sierra Leone and the U.S., the author's intended message is clearly expressed: patriarchy as a system is dreadful for women, even

[3] This issue will be tackled in detail in the next section.

deadly, no matter which form it takes the sexism that it fosters: hostile or benevolent. Manuela Barreto and David Doyle give a succinct explanation of their basic definitions:

> Hostile sexism is similar to the traditional conceptualization of prejudice as antipathy: it is negative in tone and disparages women who challenge traditional gender roles and ideologies (for example, professionally successful women). It communicates a view of gender relationships as competitive, with women wanting to dominate men and threatening men's higher status in society. By contrast, benevolent sexism has a more positive tone: it idealizes and flatters women who embody traditional ideals (such as stay-at-home mothers), and portrays women as morally pure and uniquely caring, but also as weak and unable to take care of themselves. Benevolent sexism portrays gender relationships as cooperative and complementary, with men in charge of protection and security and women dedicated to nurture and reproduction.
>
> (2023: 99)

As we can see, both kinds of sexism support gender inequalities and a gender hierarchy headed by men who assign a secondary position to women defined either as "wanting to dominate men," or in the best of cases, "in need of protection" due to their vulnerability and weakness.

In the case of the novel, the writer blatantly exposes the harsh consequences of both types of sexism to show her young readers the underpinnings of patriarchy, its main precepts and power dynamics based on a very hostile form of sexism which is passed off as benevolent sexism. Consequently, she portrays a very violent society in which women are dominated by men and relegated to the domestic sphere. The acceptance of girls to become "good women" takes the form of an aggressive "Ritual of Purity" that all girls must undergo at the age of sixteen in order to qualify as members of Otera society, which basically means to be "eligible to marry, have a family of my own" (8). The ritual itself is multifaceted as it changes meaning in the narrative. At the beginning, it is just presented as an "innocent" marriage market: "Even though Irfut is remote, it's known for its pretty girls, and men come from far distances to look at the eligible ones before they take the mask. Lots of girls will find husbands today—if they haven't already" (11). This connection with the marriage market astutely involves the patriarchal strategy of objectification of these girls who have to follow the conventional patriarchal script to be validated as "true women."

Ironically, these biased practices in the novel actually recall the nineteenth-century ideology of the "Cult of true womanhood," firstly delineated by the historian Barbara Welter in her 1966 article "The Cult of True Womanhood 182-1860," mainly around four main virtues: "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues−piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (1966: 152). A classic reference to understand this profoundly racist and sexist ideological apparatus can be found in Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987). Carby revises this gender ideology in order to chronicle the emergence of Black women novelists at that time, and the many obstacles they had to face including the deconstruction of this harming ideology.

Far from that idealized and naïve image that the cult of true women promotes, the ritual also entails a process of categorization reminiscent of human sacrifices, as the

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

girls are bled to be classified: if they bleed red, they are considered human and pure; but if they bleed gold, they are deemed demons and impure. The first group is rewarded with marriage and a life of service to their husbands and families, while the second group is savagely punished becoming outcasts, if they are able to survive a hideous and brutalizing treatment inflicted by the elders and even by the male members of their own families, which includes cruel torture methods, repeated killings by dismemberment, beheading, etc., after being bled almost to death to take advantage of and capitalize on their gold blood.

Although the first group of women is supposedly honored (and blessed) to become trusted wives and mothers, one wonders about what sort of reward that actually is. Being pure is coded in religious terms from the very start according to the dominant religion of Infinite Wisdom: "Blessed are the meek and subservient, the humble and true daughters of man, for they are unsullied in the face of the Infinite Father," which the protagonist Deka rightly interprets as "a constant reminder that women were created to be helpmeets to men, subservient to their desires and commands" (10). Even the "good or true women" have to wear masks in order to maintain their purity in public away from leering gazes, as another passage of Infinite Wisdom warns: "Only the impure, blaspheming, and unchaste woman remains revealed under the eyes of Oyomo" (9). This imposition of masks may be comparable to the controversial practice of the veil in Muslim communities up to a point. In the novel, to wear the mask is compulsory once the women have been submitted to the ritual of purity and have passed the blood test.

In this sense, the novel encapsulates a reflection on extreme forms of gender violence that the Otera men subject women to, but also a meditation on the complex notion of female trauma, as the writer asserts:

> There were certain parts of the book that were deeply difficult to write because this book is about female trauma. There were certain points where these girls are so traumatized and I felt like I was writing my rage out or my fear out, and it was a deeply uncomfortable process.
>
> (Long, 2019: 8)

Especially the impure women are so traumatized that they can hardly articulate those traumas at the outset of the novel.[4] In the case of Deka, the process is facilitated by understanding that she is not "inhuman, demonic" (45), a "monster" (46) or "unnatural"

[4] On the one hand, the importance of blood to determine purity or impurity recalls the racist notion of the one-drop rule throughout the period of slavery which was used as a principle of racial classification by which a person with one single drop of black blood was considered black, and consequently could be enslaved: "The property interests of slaveholders and the social priorities of Jim Crow racism are central to the principle of hypodescent. Keeping the color line sharp facilitated the enslavement of children begotten upon slave women by white men" (https://www.amacad.org/publication/daedalus/one-drop-one-hate). On the other, the idea of impurity can be understood as an indirect reference to the patriarchal strategy which considers many women impure, unworthy, if they do not follow social conventions and behave like "good women." Specifically in the case of African American women, impurity also resonates as a reminder of the fact that "true women" had to be pure, that is, virgin till marriage and faithful when married. Indeed, purity was considered the main asset of any "true woman," as we have seen above. Without purity, black enslaved women could not qualify as "true women," merely considered as workers and breeders who could not fulfil female traditional roles. As Angela Davis argues, "judged by the evolving nineteenth century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies" (1983: 5).

(53) after having survived nine kinds of death: "beheading, burning, drowning, hanging, poisoning, stoning, disemboweling, bloodletting, dismemberment" (46). Little by little, the narrative uncovers those deep traumas Deka and all the Alaki share, helping these women to come to terms with the horrible events and find some peace. Since all these characters undergo a very difficult journey from trauma to healing, the novel could even be defined as a healing ritual itself, basically divided into two main phases: firstly, storytelling and "truth-telling," and secondly, recovering or discovering their self-worth.

In the first stage the complexities of the notions of voice and trust are delved into when Deka meets an ambivalent and commanding character she nicknames White Hands, the Emperor's emissary, who literally saves her from further mistreatment in the cellar she has been confined to after the ritual. This character discloses the truth behind the bleeding: "While you cower here in misery, those elders sell your gold to the highest bidder so nobles can make pretty trinkets from it. They enrich themselves off your suffering—parasites, quite literally draining the blood from you" (47). When this disgusting truth hits Deka, she decides to take up the offer to become a warrior in order to obtain absolution and the cleansing of her "demonic nature" (48), reverting to purity once again after twenty years of service. Women who bleed gold and have gold blood function as a powerful symbol in the novel, gold blood clearly signaled as a dynamic symbol which changes meaning over the course of the narrative. At the beginning of the novel, it is viewed as a tool instrumentalized by the patriarchal system to extract economic benefit, but also to eschew protests by families, as Deka realizes: "It's the Ritual that gives them legitimacy to the murder" (55). So, truth-telling allows Deka to find a way out of the inhuman entrapment she has been subjected to and look for another option.

But meeting other women like her also figures prominently in that journey from trauma to healing. On their way to the training camp to become part of the Emperor's army, Deka meets Britta, and she instantly experiences a sense of "recognition" (53). Indeed, it is Britta the one who reveals to Deka a possible common origin for their gold blood thanks to White Hands' timely intervention: "We're the descendants of the Gilded Ones," who were described in Otera's myth of origins:

> Four ancient demons, they preyed upon humanity for centuries, destroying kingdom after kingdom until everyone finally banded together for protection, forming Otera, the One Kingdom. It took several battles before the first emperor was finally able to destroy them, and he only did so using the might of Otera's combined armies.
>
> (56-7)

This ancestral tale is presumed to be the "true" basis of Otera kingdom, which is soon reshaped as a patriarchal myth of origins, as Deka promptly evidences: "The Gilded Ones were female . . . and they were always depicted with gold veins running over their bodies" (57). However, at this point in the story both Deka and Britta believe that their ascendancy makes them "predatory beasts" (58). In fact, they are hybrid characters, the result of the mixing of the Gilded Ones and humanity, hence their hybridity accounts for their supernatural powers. In the case of Deka even more so, since she is also a mixed-blood: "Then I came along-a child dark enough to be a Southerner but with Father's grey eyes, cleft chin, and softly curled hair to say otherwise" (9). So, she confirms her worst fear of not being really human, and continues to be traumatized after this truth is revealed.

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

Once in the training camp which is suggestive of concentration camps in many scenes,[5] the process of storytelling is undertaken by the Alaki very slowly because of their traumatic experiences. The issue of trust is brought to the forefront when it is clear to them that they need to collaborate in order to survive all the obstacles. Britta once again is assigned the role of spokesperson to voice that need: "Let's make the best of it by becoming friends . . . or allies, I-leastways" (107). The call for female bonding is reinforced throughout the rest of the narrative, as they clearly acknowledge the fact that they are "bloodsisters," as Deka later puts it following one of their trainer's words: "If we're to survive the next twenty years, we have to do so together, not just as allies but as friends−family" (133). This bonding will enable them to overcome many difficult situations, as they continuously risk their lives to perform their duties as the Emperor's warriors in their frequent battles to destroy and win over their temible enemies, the deathshrieks, which are considered non-human, tellingly described as "pack animals" (176).

A veritable Bildungsroman, the novel narrates their adventures as they engage in many awful and bloody battles, simultaneously trying to enhance their understanding of the true nature of their supernatural abilities. Among them, Deka acquires a very prominent role when she finds out that she has the ability to command deathshrieks, already mentioned above, and Britta is appointed as her protector in the vulnerable periods she experiences after using her power. Deka is also the one who actually tracks down many traits of deathshrieks' life which confuse her, especially when they find a cave, clearly a sacred space filled with human traces and four significant "colossal" statues: "There's one at each of this chamber's four corners, and they are all women, from a different Oteran province" (239) that clearly represent the Gilded Ones. Gradually, the novel recounts Deka's encounters with deathshrieks which rightly question and defy the definition of who the monsters are. Indeed, there is a new definition of deathshrieks, who are not inhuman monsters but actually the reborn Alaki after they experience their final death. Deka also realizes that she is their "uruni," that is, their leader who in fact has betrayed them all this time seduced by the promises of the patriarchal kingdom. Challenging previous notions, Deka understands her real role and strategically positions herself in defense of the Alaki and the deathshieks.

As fierce and near-immortal women leaders, the Alaki eventually create a community led by Deka which claims more power and control of themselves. Their exceptional gifts help them to empower themselves by turning upside down power relations, as was suggested before by the critic Mahoney. This will be the second phase of the healing ritual, where they are completely convinced of their interdependence and of the necessity to support each other. Although they have been heavily condemned and mistreated, they are finally able to see their own worth and learn how to defend themselves from the outside attacks. After having been stripped of everything—family, community, home, love—, they recreate and cherish a female community based on love and mutual care, thus turning a very difficult and traumatic situation into an opportunity to grow together. In order to survive and achieve the common objective of cleansing

[5] One disturbing fact about the training camp is that they are actually enclosed and cannot leave the premises unless authorized. But worst of all is the punishment they face if they don't comply with their duties of killing a certain number of deathshrieks in each battle. The novel recounts the harsh punishment they are subjected if they don't reach the imposed quota, but not the male warriors: "They never punish the boys. Even when girls die" (165). On the whole, it can be said that they are treated more like prisoners than soldiers in spite of their commitment to their tasks.

themselves and returning to a pure state, they eschew the shame and repulsion for themselves and develop pride for who they are, sharing the hope in a better future. This hope is what makes them commit themselves to their cause even more ardently and thus they change the course of the story by setting the record straight, as it were.

On the path to self-definition and healing, the Alaki remind themselves that they are warriors by choice, and consciously and collectively decide to focus on the constructive goal to help the rest of the world, including humans and deathshrieks, to turn away from the war and chaos propitiated by the Emperor's forces. The first step to do that is to "free the goddesses" (391), and Deka has to face the Emperor himself to achieve that. In the process of liberation more truths are revealed, as Deka is able to reunite Alaki and deathshrieks using her powerful voice: "They called us demons, even though we are the daughters of the goddesses! The Gilded Ones were never infernal beings. They were the goddesses who founded Otera" (382). She also finds out about the actual role of White Hands, or the Lady of Equus and the Emperor's grandmother, who in fact was one of the Firstborn who tried to defend the Mothers and was harshly punished for it being submitted to dismemberment: "my ancestors couldn't find her final death . . . so they just left her there for a hundred years until she went mad . . . she pleaded and cried, promised she'd serve us, the traitorous bitch. And she did, for centuries—until now" (393). Especially significant is the reassessment of the Gilded Ones in the final pages of the book, who are now considered not only Mothers but also victims of the scheming patriarchal leaders, as the Emperor himself announces: "We buried them in the blood of their own children . . . We melted down scores of infernal armour—told the alaki we were creating a tribute to our mothers. Then we lured them here and poured the molten gold all over them. We imprisoned them" (395). So Deka confirms her suspicion that "they were entombed alive, trapped as they sat on their thrones" (395), to serve the dark purposes of the patriarchal rule.

Once Deka has completed the task of freeing the goddesses, the matriarchal line is restored and the goddesses show their pride in Deka, which leads her to finally feel a sense of belonging: "That these goddesses, these beings, should claim me as their own—it's almost more than I can take in" (407). Almost immediately, she is entrusted with the new mission of helping the kingdom: "We will rebuild the One Kingdom to what once it was: a place where all can exist in harmony, in peace . . . We will ensure that it thrives once more" (407). So, opposing the culture of war and destruction advocated by the patriarchal kingdom, the matriarchal order is based on a culture of interdependence and peace because "everyone deserves peace" (387).

The novel ends on a hopeful note for a better future in Otera, although the battle is not over yet but will continue till the army of Alaki, together with the Firstborn and the goddesses, reclaims the whole kingdom. The confrontation between patriarchal and matriarchal worldviews goes on. However, the matriarchal kingdom has been restored to its legitimate place and the power dynamics have been reestablished thanks to female bonding and female empowerment. The Alaki have become heroines in their own right and social justice has triumphed. At least for the time being. Forna's novel clearly points out at the manifold difficulties Alaki women have to deal with in order to achieve balance and a culture of peace and hope to replace the culture of violence and fear the patriarchal kingdom was based on. A matriarchal kingdom may be the only chance for humanity, as Sears suggested, the only opportunity for a better future which opens new venues for love, interdependence and hope.

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.6035/clr.8081

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (2009). The Dangers of a Single Story. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Atwood, Margaret (1998). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anchor Books.

Barreto, Manuela and David Doyle (2023). Benevolent and Hostile Sexism in a Shifting Global Context. *Nature Reviews Psychol*ogy, 2, 98-111. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00136-x

Butler, Octavia (1999). Vintage WD: How I Built Novels out of Writer's Block. *Writer's Digest*, June. Accessed: 16 May 2024. https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/vintage-wd-how-i-built-novels-out-of-writers-blocks

Carby, Hazel (1987). *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford University Press.

Cortiel, Jeanne (2015). Feminist Utopia/Dystopia: Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975) and Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In A. Voigts-Virchow, Eckart/Boller (Ed.). *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse. Classics, New Tendencies, Model Interpretations* (pp. 155-169). Trier.

Davis, Angela (1983). *Women, Race & Class*. Vintage Books.

Dery, Mark (1994). Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. In M. Dery (Ed). *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (pp. 179-222). Duke University Press.

Desmet, Fran (2010). *Female Perspectives in the Utopian Novel*. PhD Dissertation, Ghent University.

Dillon, Sarah (2020). Who Rules the World? Reimagining the Contemporary Feminist Dystopia. In J. Cooke (Ed). *The New Feminist Literary Studies* (pp. 169-181). Cambridge University Press.

González Groba, Constante, Ewa Barbara Luczak and Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis (2023). *Pathologizing Black Bodies. The Legacy of Plantation Slavery*. Routledge.

Hartman, Saidiya (2007). *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Trade Route Terror.* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Mahoney, Elisabeth (1994). *Writing So To Speak: The Feminist Dystopia*. PhD Dissertation, University of Glasgow.

Namina Forna webpage. https://naminaforna.com/in-the-press

"Namina Forna" (2021). February. https://www.readingzone.com/authors/namina-forna/.

Long, Stephanie (2019). *The Gilded Ones* Author Namina Forna Could Be The Toni Morrison Of YA Fantasy. November 7. https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/namina-forna-the-gilded-ones-cover-interview

Forna, Namina (2021). *The Gilded Ones*. Usborne Books.

Forna, Namina (2022). *The Merciless Ones*. Detacorte Press.

Forna, Narmina (2024). *The Eternal Ones*. Usborne Books.

Sayej, Nadja (2018). Beyond Black Panther: Afrofuturism Takes Flight at Chicago Museum. *The Guardian* 10 April. Accessed: 10 April 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/10/afrofuturism-ex…form-museum-contemporary-photography-chicago?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Sears, Rachael I (2015). Butler: To Take Root Among the Stars. *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature,* 5.2 (Summer), 22-31.

Smith, Jamil (2019). The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther. *Time*. Accessed: 23 March 2019. http: time.com/black-panther

Stillman, Peter (2003). Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's Parables. *Utopian Studies*, 14. 1, 15-35.

Strong, Myron and Sean Chaplin (2019). Afrofuturism and Black Panther. *Contexts* (Spring), 58-59.

Welter, Barbara (1866). The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860. *American Quarterly,* 18.2, Part 1 (Summer), 151-174.