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Monstrous Others: Black Girl Refusal in Afrofuturist Young Adult Literature

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Following a debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former Vice President Mike Pence, then President Donald Trump appeared on Fox News to give his reaction statement: “This monster that was onstage with Mike Pence, who destroyed her last night, by the way, but this monster ... I thought that wasn’t even a contest last night. She was terrible. I don’t think you could get worse ... And totally unlikable” (Summers, par. 2). Although the use of these descriptors are negative in their own right, Summers also noted that Trump “previously reserved the term ‘monster’ for terrorists, murder[ers] and major natural disasters” (par. 1). In this way, Trump attempted to dehumanize and diminish Vice President Harris, a strategy historically based in the continuous global stereotype of Black women and girls as monstrous Other. According to Muhammad and McArthur, the “‘double jeopardy’ of being both Black and female in society has continued to create and reinforce a U.S. culture satiated with derogatory representations of Black women and girls” (134). These representations include stereotypes like the Mammy, a desexualized woman so loyal to whiteness that she cares more for her masters than she does for herself and her family; the Sapphire, a loud, rude, malicious, overbearing, and angry woman; and the Jezebel, a hypersexual, innately promiscuous, and sexually deviant woman (Harris 4–6; West 288). Each of these stereotypes positions Black women and girls as Other, a being who is “a threat and a danger” (de Beauvoir 88) to those in dominant society.

Although the above stereotypes are often associated with Black women, they also influence the lives of Black girls. In fact, numerous scholars have argued that society’s perception of Black girls is distorted by clichéd depictions that create harmful restrictions on and blatant misrepresentations of Black girls’ identities (Muhammad and Haddix 301; Sealey-Ruiz 291; Toliver, “Breaking Binaries” 6). In a survey study of 325 adults from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, Epstein and colleagues found that, compared to white girls of the same age, Black girls are inaccurately described as knowing more about adult topics and sex and therefore need less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort (1). Anderson and others found that Black women

and girls are disproportionately objectified in relation to their white counterparts and often implicitly associated with animals and objects rather than humanity (462). Thus, Black girls and women are more likely to be branded as things, more akin to item and beast than human. Morris noted that “Black girls are also directly impacted by criminalizing policies and practices that render them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, dehumanization, and, under the worst circumstances, death” (1–2). These studies suggest that Black girls are the embodiment of otherness, thought to bring disorder, terror, and dread in their wake. They are the Others – not child, not girl, not cared for. These implicit biases cause “individuals and systems to bring violence into [Black girls] lived experiences” (Brown and Outley 13).

Considering these ideas, this essay explores two young adult novels: *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna and *Raybearer* by Jordan Ifueko. I examine these texts because both include a Black girl protagonist who is deemed monstrous and is warned to fall in line and follow orders. Both girls are given explanations that signal their lives are not their own, but they refuse to be bound by the restrictions society places upon them. They refuse to heed the warnings, and they choose to live their lives on their own terms. Despite prolonged difficulty throughout the novels, they find ways to resist, pushing the boundaries of Otherness and refusing the borders of monstrosity. These Black girl characters mirror the everyday refusals of real Black girls who persist despite continued violence, who refuse limitation despite their positioning as monstrous Others. They persist; they refuse; they endure. In centering these young adult novels, I not only portray how Black girls are situated as monstrous and find ways to resist within these texts, but I also connect this positioning to real Black girls, who are consistently stereotyped as threats and dangers and who continuously persist in a world that craves the death of supposed monsters.

Monster theory and otherness

Every civilization across time and space has dealt with societal monsters, from the Kongamato in Zambia to Big Foot in North America to the Loch Ness Monster in the Scottish Highlands. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that humans are enthralled by monsters, and this infatuation “manifests itself symptomatically as a cultural fascination with monsters – a fixation born of the twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens” (viii). In other words, creating monsters is an attempt to categorize and tame a being that exists outside the borders of perceived normality. Of course, if this fascination were reserved for mythical beasts and creatures that lurked in dark forests and underwater spaces, societal interest in monsters would be of little consequence. However, “monstrosity is a socially constructed category

reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires, and often deployed – wittingly or not – to achieve particular sociopolitical objectives” (Weinstock 25). That is, the categorization of monsters is essential to the understanding of society. In fact, critic Alexa Wright argues that Otherness is often affiliated with monstrosity, specifically noting that the need to curate and uphold existing power structures is essential in the creation of societal monsters (181). She further contends that race, gender, sexuality, and disability are constructed as monstrous as compared “to the image of the straight, white, ‘rational,’ and able-bodied European male, which in Western culture has traditionally been the standard by which all ‘others’ are judged” (181). Thus, monsters and the idea of monstrosity is unstable, an idea used to classify beings, including people, as things that do not belong, as entities that must be apprehended, contained, and disempowered.

In literature, monsters have often been metaphorically or overtly connected to racial, gendered, sexual, and disabled Others. Specifically, horror scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock states that the speculative genres – science fiction, fantasy, and horror – often include monsters who mirror real-world Others marred by malicious stereotypes (17). Similarly, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas maintains that the vast array of monstrous bodies that populate speculative texts are often akin to racialized others, so much so that “the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monsters*” (23). For example, in an examination of the television show, *The Walking Dead*, Samaa Abdurraqib notes that Michonne, a character who is often positioned as the strong, angry Black woman, is symbolically indistinguishable from the horde of zombies that sometimes surrounds her (247). Although Abdurraqib uses this fact to showcase how Michonne’s acknowledgment of her own monstrosity negates the negative stereotypes of Black womanhood surrounding the character, this statement also positions a Black woman as one of the monsters, as inhuman as the walking dead who stalk the last surviving humans. Samantha Langsdale, in her study of monstrosity and Black girlhood in *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, argues that white audiences and white creators often ingest and wield depictions of monstrous Black girls which may “perpetuate the marginalization of bodies marked as aberrant because of race and gender” (408). That is, coupling Black girls with monstrosity in popular films and texts could bolster the marginalization of real Black girls.

As monstrosity is socially constructed and often attached to a culturally specific fear and fascination of the Other, and as Black girls are often considered Other in comparison to dominant standards of normality, it is imperative to consider how Black girls – society’s monstrous Others – resist classification and transgress seemingly normative boundaries. It is important

to explore how Black girls, in literature and the real world, persist and endure despite societal attempts to disempower, discourage, and extinguish their existence. It is critical to center Black girl refusal in a world that refuses to see them as human.

Monstrosity and resistance in *Raybearer*

Jordan Ifueko's debut novel follows the journey of Tarisai of Swana from youth to young adulthood. Throughout her childhood, Tarisai craves love and human touch, but her wish eludes her – her mother, The Lady, is hardly ever home, the servants are forbidden to touch her, and she is not allowed to leave the halls of Bhekina house, which is both her home and her prison. She states that she “longed for touch so much, [she] would bend [her] cheek to open flames . . . pretending to feel The Lady's fingers” (Ifueko 10). So, she is willing to harm herself for counterfeit affection. The limited social and physical interactions she has had over the years cause her to believe she cannot be touched. In fact, in a meeting with Melu, an alagbato/magical guardian who happens to be her father, the following scene occurs:

“I'm not allowed to be touched,” I snapped, clawing at the alagbato's grip. His skin felt smooth and hot, like clay left to harden in the sun.

“Not allowed? You are small enough to be carried. I am told human children need affection.”

“Well, I'm not human,” I shot back in triumph. “So put me down.”

“Who told you that, little girl?”

“No one,” I admitted after a pause. “But [the servants] all say it behind my back. I'm not like other children.” (4)

Here, Tarisai positions herself as inhuman even though no one has directly defined her as such. She knows the servants believe she is otherworldly, a demon who must always be confined, especially since she has the power to explore people's memories. She considers herself to be a monster, living on the “fringes of the known world, outside human society, and yet part of it, alien and yet somehow familiar” (Bildhauer 193). She is the unseen, a human on the margins of humanity, an Other removed from childhood even though she looks like a human girl.

As the story progresses, the reader learns that Tarisai was born to fulfill her mother's wish: to kill the crown prince and end the royal line. Specifically, The Lady traps Melu, forcing him to grant her three wishes. The first is for the creation of Bhekina house, and the second is for the death of the king. Melu tells her, however, “life and death are beyond [his] power. *Especially* that life” (Ifueko 8). Frustrated but not deterred, The Lady wishes for a child who will indirectly grant her third wish, as the child will not be bound by alagbato rules. Melu reluctantly agrees, and Tarisai is born, the

cursed wish flowing through her veins. After Melu shows her the history of her birth, Tarisai says her “mother was the devil, and I, her puppet demon” (9), solidifying herself as a monstrous entity. Her position as monster does not deter her from seeking affection from others, however. For example, when she meets her new guardians who will take her from Bhékina House to the palace, she wants to be like them, so she can have friends. She thinks to herself: “Don’t think I’m a demon . . . *Think I’m a girl. A normal, market-caravan, not-scary girl*” (16). Later, when she’s taken to the palace and is finally around a large group of children, she says, “I would trade all the wealth in Aritsar to be held. To be touched without fear. To never be called *dangerous*” (18). Her wish remains unfulfilled, however, because despite her efforts to tell her own story, she is called demon, thing, weapon, killer, and monster throughout the novel. She remains an ambiguous hybrid, “an uncanny redistribution of human elements into aberrant configurations . . . an interrogation of the myths of human integrity, biologically and metaphysically” (MacCormack 532). She cannot escape the unusual circumstances of her birth, and she is forced to acknowledge her monstrous hybridity whether she wants to or not.

Tarisai’s inability to escape monstrosity is compounded by the fact that she does not own her body. Bound to her mother’s wish, she is compelled to obey. For instance, as she gets to know the crown prince, Ekundayo, she begins to develop a bond with him. Their relationship is essential to The Lady’s plans, as only an anointed one can kill the king or crown prince. Knowing this, Tarisai attempts to resist becoming an anointed one and tries to find a way to release herself from The Lady’s whims. In one instance, Dayo, as the prince is often called, attempts the anointing, and Tarisai refuses. When she declines, she hears Melu’s voice:

It is a shame you must hurt the boy. But an ehru may not resist a master’s wish.
Give in. Give in, daughter, and we will both be free.

“I have no master,” I snarled.

The apparition gave a ghostly sigh, long and grim. *Yes, you do.* (Ifueko 47)

Tarisai attempts to resist, to exert power over her own life, yet she is a prisoner to her mother’s wish. She realizes both she and Melu are “griots in a pantomime, forced to sing every line in this grim story, dancing to a beat [her] mother drummed” (173). Her mother wrote the narrative, and she is forced to take the lead role. Because of her mother’s control, she reaches a point where she can resist no longer. She is anointed and charged with Dayo’s protection, and although she tries to forget The Lady, Melu, and the wish, she eventually attempts to take Dayo’s life. During the scene, a “dim voice struggles to rise in her thoughts” (158), warning Dayo to run and get away from her, but the wish is too strong. When Dayo asks Tarisai if she truly cares for him, a voice that is not her own replies, “she did love you . . .

but she wasn't strong enough" (159) right before plunging a knife into Dayo's stomach. At this moment, Tarisai's inner monster, the Hyde she has tried to suppress, frees itself.

Though Tarisai reluctantly attempts to fulfill her mother's wish, she resists enough to ensure Dayo lives. After stabbing him, she calls for help and requests the aid of her anointed siblings. As she hyperventilates, fear immobilizing every bone in her body, the following conversation occurs:

"You remembered," [Dayo] said.

"Don't talk. Rest, I'll get help." His words didn't make sense. My tears were a torrent; my ribs shuddered with each breath.

"You missed my heart." He smiled, voice gurgling with blood. "That means you're stronger than her, Tar." (Ifueko 161)

Even though her inner demon takes over and attempts to kill the prince, Tarisai challenges the monstrous, willing the knife to make a non-life threatening injury. She is surprised and relieved that she failed to complete her task, but although her resistance may be startling to her, she has engaged in resistance practices throughout the story. For example, Dayo repeatedly asks Tarisai to become one of his anointed after she saves him from a fire, but she rejects his requests because she knows her appointment could mean his death. Eventually, however, she realizes that saving Dayo might be easier if she stays by his side. To outsmart the curse, she uses her memory powers to remove all recollection of her life prior to her entry into the palace. She believes she can protect Dayo if she can forget her mother, Melu, and the curse ever existed:

I threw embers and blazing torches, I sent rivers of fire; still she smiled, unscathed. *Give up*, the smile said. "*Your mind protects me with the same ferocity with which it defends your own name.*"

But, I'm not you, I whispered back.

Are you sure?

My brow beaded with sweat. *My name is my own. My name is my own. My-name. My - own-*

And at last, the shield of adamant shattered . . . concealed in impenetrable smoke were those lethal words, spoken over me like an incantation: *I command you to kill him.* (91)

She resists her mother and the wish by choosing to forget her childhood and her parents, by deciding to preserve the life of the boy she has come to love and respect. She even resists unconsciously, as Dayo notes:

Once, after you fell asleep, you put your hand on my face. And I saw everything. The alagboto, The Lady. The day she showed you my picture, and wished for you to kill me. You didn't mean to share that memory, I think. But you wanted to. Looking back, you tried to warn me a million different ways. Even while you slept. (282)

Ultimately, even as she is deemed monstrous and even though multiple entities try to force her into the role of demon, she refuses, persisting despite the numerous ways in which her mother and larger society attempt to define and confine her. She decides she is not dangerous, not cursed, not able to commit harm. She will only be loved and receive love in return.

Monstrosity and resistance in *The Gilded Ones*

Namina Forna's novel centers Dekka of Irfut, a 16-year-old girl who lives in the West African inspired world of Otera. Every year, adolescent girls are required to undergo the Ritual of Purity, a ceremony in which the high priest of the city cuts the girl to see if their blood bleeds red or gold. If they bleed red, they are deemed pure, lauded for their ability to enter society as clean women worthy of marriage and capable of taking care of a household and raising children. If they bleed gold, they are considered demons, impure and unable to become a member of society because their strength, endurance, and skill are much higher than the average human. In fact, if their blood is tainted, they are subjected to the Death Mandate, an event in which the high priests murder the impure girls for the good of the community. This mandate is especially heinous considering that for the "demon" girls, death does not always come easily. Some of them – the alaki – are nearly immortal, able to withstand beheading, decapitation, impalement, burning, and dismemberment. Exposing them to the Death Mandate would equate to multiple deaths as the priests attempt to find the one method that ensures they do not rise again. This ritual is sanctioned by The Infinite Wisdoms, the religious doctrine that grounds the nation. So, religion justifies the murder of the girls; faith ensures the removal of impurity.

Although Dekka has lived in the city since her birth, she is "still treated like a stranger – still stared and pointed at, still excluded" (Forna 3). She receives this treatment because of her brown skin, but she believes the purity ritual will help people see that she is uncontaminated, worthy of love and acceptance. At the beginning of the novel before the ritual is performed, she states:

No matter how quiet I am, how inoffensive I remain, my brown skin will always mark me as a Southerner, a member of the hated tribes that long ago conquered the North and forced it to join the One Kingdom, now known as Otera. Only the Ritual of Purity can ensure my place. Please let me be pure, please let me be pure. I send a quick prayer to Oyomo. (Forna 6)

Here, Dekka acknowledges how her skin is a reminder of war, but in praying to Oyomo, she shows her devoutness while also presenting her desire to be welcomed into the community despite her skin. Of course, her prayer goes unanswered. During a brief scuffle with the deathshrieks – horrifying monsters with a killing scream and razor-sharp claws who attack villages

across Otera to steal young girls – Dekka is cut. At first, she bleeds red, but the color begins to change, turning to gold. She prays to Oyomo, pleads with her father and the high priest, and looks for someone to come to her aid, but she is cast away. As she undergoes the Death Mandate, she is murdered once by a boy she likes and once by her father. In fact, she is killed nine times: “Beheading, burning, drowning, hanging, poisoning, stoning, disemboweling, bloodletting, dismemberment . . . Several dismemberments, only one of which killed me” (40). With each death, her monstrosity is solidified as she becomes “an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other” (Cohen x). Because her body refuses to die, she is the breaker of normality, removed from humanity because her existence does not fit within the boundaries of traditional human life and death.

As Dekka mourns the loss of potential purity, an imperial emissary, White Hands, presents her with a choice: continue to die and allow the priests to take and sell her golden blood, or become a warrior for the emperor and kill enough deathshrieks to absolve her sins. Believing the hope of purity to be a farce, but wary of continued violence, Dekka agrees to become an alaki warrior, for “who better to fight a monster than another monster?” (Forna 40). Dekka feels shame at being described as a monster and a demon, as the terms position her as a societal outcast. The Infinite Wisdoms say, “Blessed are the meek and subservient, the humble and true daughters of man, for they are unsullied in the face of the Infinite Father” (4), but Dekka knows she will never be meek or humble because warriors are supposed to showcase their strength and skill in battle. The Infinite Wisdoms also forbid women from “working outside the house except in service to their husbands and families” (97), and they state that “girls can’t shout, drink, ride horses, go to school, learn a trade, learn to fight, [or] move about without a male guardian” (135). Ultimately, the Infinite Wisdoms confine girls to traditional gender roles, but to survive the Death Mandate, she must act beyond traditional boundaries and challenge how girls are expected to behave.

As a warrior, Dekka will go against each of these religious commands, as she will have to learn to fight in a school-like setting, defeat deathshrieks outside of the home, shout commands when necessary, and engage in combat without a male guardian. Beal argues that monsters signify “what endangers one’s sense of at-homeness, that is, one’s sense of security, stability, integrity, well-being, health, and meaning. They make one feel not at home at home. They are figures of chaos and disorientation within order and orientation” (297–298). Dekka is the being that promotes instability. She looks like a girl, someone the Infinite Wisdoms connect with servitude, innocence, stability, and at-homeness, yet, she is also a “demon,” one who upsets the balance and creates fear and anxiety within the larger world.

Choosing to embrace monstrosity and become a warrior forces Deka to relinquish the hope for any perceived bodily autonomy she thought would come with the conferral of cleanliness. When she first arrives at the Warthu Bera, the alaki training camp, she is horded into a large room along with other girls, and they are separated by potential skill and health. Deka arrived at the training camp in good health, but other girls did not, with many being beaten, malnourished, and raped on the journey. As Deka awaits her turn to be examined by inspectors, the following exchange occurs:

The girls' transporter, a stocky bearded man, raises loud objections when he's given only half a bag of gold as payment. "I was promised sixty otas a girl! Sixty!" he splutters.

The assistant's reply is loud and implacable. "That one is sickly and ill-fed. You were warned not to maltreat the emperor's property."

The emperor's property . . . Disgust sweeps over me at the words. I thought we were supposed to be soldiers. (Forna 92)

Through this exchange, Deka learns she is owned, that although she left Irfut in hopes of gaining some control over her life, she has relinquished control to the emperor. She is more akin to item or beast than human.

The removal of bodily autonomy continues throughout the novel, as Deka realizes she is part of the most elite alaki unit. She recounts that while the other soldiers were treated humanely and given healers, rest, and food when needed, her regimen was "regarded as demons and trained accordingly. We were flayed, beaten, subjected to deathshriek screams" (Forna 324). She did not choose such a harsh environment, but because she is not in control, she has no other option. Even when the girls are sent into combat, their battle cry, "we who are dead salute you" (322), emphasizes their bodies are not their own, as they have metaphorically submitted their lives to the emperor before the *mêlée* ever begins. For instance, as the troops rally for a large deathshriek campaign, the following exchange occurs:

"Alaki of the Warthu Bera! Conquer or die!" [White Hands] commands.

"We who are dead salute you!" [the alaki] reply, raising our fists and then beating them across our chests.

"Wherever we attack, we will conquer or bury ourselves in its ruins!"

"We who are dead salute you!" we repeat, beating our chests. "We who are dead salute you!" (322)

The battle cry repeatedly suggests that the girls who are prepared to enter battle are already dead. They are the living dead, entering battle at the whim of their master. As critic Sarah Juliet Lauro argues, the zombie symbolizes "the powerlessness of the colonial slave who inspired its ancestral mythology" (xi). This call and response between White Hands and the alaki showcase how the girls' lives are no longer their own. They are already dead, zombies who are powerless in the face of the larger government. They are powerless,

forced to conquer the deathshrieks or die on the battlefield. If they fail to complete their mission and neglect to kill the required quota of deathshrieks, they should bury themselves amongst the monsters they seek to fight, as their only purpose in life is to engage in battle at the whim of the emperor.

Initially, Dekka fights without regard for what she is doing because her goal is to attain the purity she was denied. She develops special powers that connect her to the beasts, allowing her to sense them and force them to bend to her will. These skills become especially useful for her, and she uses them to ensure victory against the deathshriek horde, but as she continues her training in the Warthu Bera, her ideas about purity, the Infinite Wisdoms, and society in general begin to change. For example, during a training activity requiring the alaki and their male training partners to run long distances, Dekka notices that her fellow warriors are slowing down, allowing the boys to run in front of them. Rather than remaining meek and humbled, Dekka challenges these actions:

Our whole lives, we've been taught to make ourselves smaller, weaker than men. That's what the Infinite Wisdoms teach—that being a girl means perpetual submission . . . The truth is, girls have to wear smiling masks, contort themselves into all kind of knots to please others, and then, when deathshrieks come, girls die. They die . . . The way I see it, we all have a choice right now. Are we girls, or are we demons? Are we going to die, or are we going to survive? (Forna 149-150)

In this moment, Dekka fully embraces the title she has been given – demon, monster. In doing so, however, she also resists the subservient requirement binding women to their partners. She refuses to be submissive, to allow the boys to govern her life, as she would have willingly done months before in Irfut. Her resistance intensifies as the narrative continues. Specifically, when a crowd of onlookers hurl insults at the alaki as they embark on their first deathshriek raid, Dekka tells a particularly rowdy man, “don’t touch my friends . . . I’ll break you to pieces before you can land a single blow” (217). In another scene, the alaki and the jatu, or male warriors, begin their final campaign against the deathshrieks, and one belligerent jatu says, “women don’t belong here – especially not your lot – and the more of you that die, the sooner you’ll know it” (327). Rather than cowering at the words of a fellow soldier, Dekka replies, “See, that’s the amusing thing . . . Death is a common thing for our kind, which is why we welcome it, consider it an old friend . . . Do you welcome death?” (327). Following this exchange, Dekka realizes the grip of the Infinite Wisdoms has loosened. By embracing supposed monstrosity and refusing the truly monstrous religious teachings of Otera, Dekka begins to understand that she can define who she is, that she can be whatever and whoever she wishes to be. Her resistance is in her refusal, her rejection of gender-confining roles that attempt to limit her ability to engage in self-definition.

Uncovering societal monstrosity

In both novels, the Black girls who lead the narratives are seen as monstrous for the unusual circumstances of their birth and the hybrid blood that flows within their bodies. As children, they are cast aside and threatened with death. They are compelled to maintain a semblance of monstrosity at the behest of family and society at large. They are dehumanized before they have a chance to decide who they are, and because of this, they endure mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional violence as they try to refuse the moniker of monstrosity. As Cohen argues, however, “the monstrous body is pure culture . . . like a letter on a page, the monster signifies something other than itself” (4). Thus, the girls’ collective monstrosity tells the reader more about the culture to which they belong rather than the girl protagonists of *Raybearer* and *The Gilded Ones*.

In *Raybearer*, the reader learns that The Lady is the sister of the Aritsar King, a rightful heir to the throne who was cast out of the palace as a child because she was a girl who refused to remain silent. In fact, any female child born into the royal family is immediately sent away, adopted by a noble family rather than raised in the palace. The history of female Raybearers is completely erased, as if women and girls are incapable of possessing such power. The only woman recognized is Aiyetoro, and she is considered a fluke, a stand-in for the male heir because the royal family had no sons. So The Lady’s wish is not created by someone intent on killing for no reason. Instead, she made the wish to destroy patriarchal rule in Aritsar. The patriarchal underpinnings of the text resound through the narrative, signaling that the real monster is the patriarchal system and the men who uphold it. For instance, during her early studies about the role of the Raybearer and his council, Tarisai asks a priest what happens when there is an empress. In response, the priest says, “there are no female Raybearers, child. Am has always chosen a man. That does not mean, of course, that female council members have no value. After all, you might *bear* a Raybearer” (Ifueko 65). This sentiment is repeated during a ceremony when Tarisai and her anointed brothers and sisters participate in a ritual meant to alert them to their futures. Specifically, when Tarisai selects a sunstone from the jug, the priest says that dominance is the meaning of her token because Arit emperors wear them on their brows. He concludes by saying, “but you are a girl, and so the meaning refers to your proximity to greatness. You shall, perhaps,” the elder said, bowing his head coily, “bear the fruit of dominance” (145). In each of these statements, the priests tell Tarisai that female rule is impossible, as the divine ruler refuses to select women. Rather than attempting to exert power, the religious leaders believe Tarisai should focus on bearing children. She should take on the role of mother, a position considered insignificant in the structure of patriarchy, and she should let Dayo lead. Ana Gonzalez Ramos

and others stated that “all societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine that represents the shock and fear of otherness, considered as those areas not controlled by the male power structure and patriarchal order” (87). In Aritsar, girls and women are considered monstrous because they are a threat and a danger to male rule. Thus, Tarisai’s perceived monstrosity signals the real patriarchal monster that seeks to control the world, the true monster lurking underneath every law and history book.

The Gilded Ones includes a similar description of a patriarchal society. Toward the end of the story, White Hands reveals that Dekka is a divine being sent by the goddesses to free them from their bondage. She details how alaki become deathshrieks upon their final deaths and explains the “jatu created the Death Mandate against our kind [the alaki] and wrote it into the Infinite Wisdoms to give it legitimacy” (Forna 369). She also tells Dekka:

Once you wake the goddesses, they’ll make Otera what it once was: a land of freedom, a land where men and women ruled equally, where women weren’t abused, beaten, raped. Where they weren’t imprisoned in their homes, told that they were sinful and unholy . . . You will help us bring those joyous times again. You will help us win freedom for all of us—every last woman in Otera, even the ones who aren’t alaki. (376)

Here, she outlines the fact that the men of Otera have used religion to disempower, domesticate, and demonize women, ensuring their subservience through fear and violence. Because girls with golden blood have divine heritage, the men strategically created the Death Mandate, ridding themselves of anyone who could overpower them. Then, by creating a training ground for alaki to fight deathshrieks, the men effectively create a system in which young women kill each other. Of course, the use of the Infinite Wisdoms to confine women’s actions is present throughout the novel, especially considering the continued representation of women and girls as pure and impure. Dekka’s story, however, suggests the lengths at which men will go to maintain power – erasing history, creating religious doctrine, killing children. In fact, during the final battle, the king of Otera says:

“Demons in the flesh, despite their celestial appearances! From time immemorial, we the jatu have vowed to protect Otera, so we imprisoned them and made sure they would never rise again. Never again would women rule Otera – this was the task of every emperor of the house of Gezo.” He looks me directly in the eye. “Never will I allow one of you filthy bitches to sit on the throne again.” (398)

The emperor’s words solidify the aims of the high-ranking men in Otera. He calls *The Gilded Ones* – the goddesses – demons. Even though White Hands noted the goddesses created a world where men and women ruled equally and where women were not subjected to daily violence (Forna 375), the emperor says they will never be in charge again, never create Oteran equality. Additionally, Kleinman and others note that the word bitch “cannot be

understood apart from its place in a society in which girls and women of all ages are members of a sex class subordinated to men ... 'bitch' is something (meant to be) dominated, conquered, and vanquished" (50–51). Thus, the emperor overtly states that girls, especially those with divine heritage, do not deserve life or freedom. They must be controlled, overpowered, and subjugated. The real demon is the patriarchal system that hinges upon the death and destruction of young girls to ensure that men retain power.

The realities of monstrosity

Thomas notes that "the Dark Other occupies the same space in reality that the monster occupies in fantasy" (20). That is, vampires, witches, beasts, zombies, dragons, ghosts, orcs, manticores and the like are often used as metaphors that represent people positioned as Other in the real world. Those people who inhabit bodies that are Black, Trans, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, Asian, disabled, Latine, non-Western, Multiracial, female, and nonbinary are positioned as the monster, the one who lurks in the shadows. The Dark Other in *Raybearer* and *The Gilded Ones* are the young Black girls who happen to exist in a patriarchal society that wishes for their erasure. They are girls who are considered monstrous Other based on the circumstances of their birth and the physical bodies they occupy. They are young women in a male-dominated world, girls who are made monsters because society wishes them to be so, because the world wishes to control and limit their possibilities for self-definition.

Like Tarisai and Deka, real Black girls are often deemed monstrous. They have books thrown at them for falling asleep in class, are arrested and handcuffed for throwing tantrums in school, and are suspended for incorrectly completing science experiments (Morris 3). Like Tarisai and Deka, Black girls exist in a patriarchal world, where religious oppression and misogyny intersect with racism, where these oppressions attempt to limit their ability to engage in self-definition. They are not individuals allowed to tell the world who they are. Instead, they are forced to exist in a confined category of girlhood in which they must confine their unique identity representations and act in submissive, passive, and obedient ways in order to remain respectable to God and to men (Edwards 760; Toliver, "Breaking Binaries" 4). Like Tarisai, Black girls often minimize themselves and blindly follow orders because refusing to do so results in the denial of "inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance ... all things a person needs to be human" (Love 302). Like Deka, Black girls are constantly murdered—physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically—each time they are killed by those who are supposed to protect and serve them – police, teachers, government officials. They face repeated deaths throughout their lives, as they

journey through a world that deems them monstrous. As Cohen stated, “No monster tastes of death but once” (5). In this case, Black girls constantly deal with the presence of death, and even though they try to dodge physical and metaphorical bullets, many will taste death multiple times throughout their lives. Still, like Tarisai and like Deka, Black girls persist in a world that attempts to erase them, a world where they are deemed monstrous because of the circumstances of their birth, because of the racial and gendered positions they occupy. They know their refusal might have dire consequences in a patriarchal world, but they resist anyway.

Excavating the literary monstrosity of Black girls is essential in an article centering girlhood and persistence because just like the monsters, ghouls, and ghosts who are often violently eradicated in fairytales, real Black girls are the scary beings subjected to violence to ensure they know their place in a white supremacist world. In fantastic literature, the monster is the embodiment of difference, a dangerous form who creates fear and anxiety for the hero and brings chaos to society. Thomas argues that the monster’s otherness is appealing, making it hyper-visible, but its otherness also imposes a distortion in the balance of good and evil, so it must be policed and simultaneously rendered invisible. The monster is not allowed to defend itself. It does not have permission to journey beyond a delimited area determined by the hero’s society. It cannot enjoy its culture because it is too different, abnormal (19–21). Similarly, Black girls are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible (Collins 100; Mowatt et al. 649), consistently policed (Morris 2; Gross 3), delimited to restricted conceptions of girlhood determined by dominant society (Toliver, “Alterity and Innocence” 11; Mims and Williams 758), and symbolized as innately and culturally oppositional to “traditional” white feminine ideals of existence (Andrews et al. 2533; Collins 73). Although the monster trope is often centered in fantasy literature, examining the monster and the monstrous is also essential to uncovering ideas embedded within the real world. In other words, analyzing Black girl monstrosity in literature can expose the real ogres who make life in the contemporary world monstrous for Black girls. It can compel readers to consider Black girls’ inherent power, a strength that scares men so much they create laws, erase history, and engage in violence to ensure Black girls have no space to decide who they are and who they wish to be. It can open space for readers to ask why persistence and resistance are often the only options for Black girls and offer space for them to consider what it might take to create worlds in which Black girls can rest, where they do not have to consistently fight and resist. It can force readers to reflect on the current world (Toliver, “Afrocarnival” 133), and, hopefully, help them see who the monsters really are.

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