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Female Beauty as a Symbol of the Nation in Selected Ethiopian Novels in English: An Intertextual Study

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ABSTRACT

This intertextual analysis examines the symbolic portrayals of beautiful female characters in four Ethiopian novels written in English: *The Thirteenth Sun* (1973), *Warrior King* (1974), *Defiance* (1975), and *Firebrands* (1979). The study explores the images of female beauty depicted in these novels and aims to uncover the underlying cultural and societal messages conveyed through these portrayals. By analyzing the specific representations of beauty, the study seeks to understand how these novels contribute to shaping the concept of female beauty in Ethiopian literature during the specified time period. The analysis encompasses both positive and negative portrayals, emphasizing the destructive images of female beauty in “*The Thirteenth Sun*” and “*Defiance*,” while also considering the external physical and inner beauty of the main characters, as well as depictions of beauty in nature or other objects within the novels. By adopting a broad-brush approach, this analysis delves into the intertextual significance of beauty in these works, shedding light on its thematic importance and portrayal within Ethiopian literature, and providing valuable insights into the cultural significance and social implications of the portrayal of beautiful women.

Keywords: Intertextuality; Female Beauty; Imagery; Symbolic Portrayals; Nation

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1. Introduction

In literature, the concept of female beauty serves as a powerful symbol that embodies social and cultural values, including the idea of nationhood. Famous people like Bathsheba and Helen embody the recurrent theme of “female beauty as a trigger for disaster or tragedy”^[1]. This intertextual study focuses on four English-language novels to examine how female beauty is portrayed in Ethiopian literature as a national symbol. The goal is to clarify the social and cultural messages that are reflected in these representations and how they have shaped Ethiopian literary discourse’s conception of female beauty. Four novels are the focus of the analysis in order to better understand female beauty in Ethiopian literature during the relevant period. This study will examine the symbolic representations of attractive female characters in these texts and uncover the cultural and societal narratives that these depictions serve to convey.

Both positive and negative representations of female beauty are examined, with a focus on the destructive imagery found in *The Thirteenth Sun* and *Defiance*. It explores the multifaceted nature of beauty and its intertextual significance by examining physical attributes, intrinsic qualities, and representations of beauty in nature or objects^[2].

This intertextual analysis explores Ethiopian literature’s thematic significance of beauty, emphasizing its symbolic meaning as the nation’s embodiment. Through an analysis of the cultural importance and social repercussions of featuring attractive women, the study offers insightful information about how these novels shape Ethiopian literary conceptions of beauty. The complex relationship between aesthetic standards and Ethiopian society is highlighted by this reflection^[3].

This analysis investigates the relationships between the chosen works and the broader literary and cultural context, guided by the concept of intertextuality. The study sheds light on shifting ideas about beauty and women’s roles in Ethiopian society by examining recurring themes^[4].

To sum up, this intertextual analysis looks into how four English-language Ethiopian novels represent female beauty symbolically. The study explores the relationship between Ethiopian literature, the nation, and beauty by looking at the cultural and societal messages that are present in these

representations. This study offers valuable insights into the cultural and social implications of the portrayal of beautiful women in Ethiopian literature, shedding light on the thematic significance and intertextual relevance of beauty through a comprehensive analysis of specific representations of beauty within these works.

2. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to analyze symbolic portrayals of beautiful female characters in selected Ethiopian novels in English published in the 1970s, namely *The Thirteenth Sun*, *Defiance*, *Warrior King*, and *Firebrands*. The specific objectives of this study are the following:

1. To investigate how female beauty is portrayed in Ethiopian literature by dissecting the depictions in the aforementioned novels. It examines how these depictions impact the concept of beauty, considering both the main characters’ inner and outer physical beauty.
2. To explore, via the chosen novels, the theme of beauty in Ethiopian literature. It examines how these novels shape the idea of female beauty and the cultural ramifications of portraying beautiful women, analyzing both positive and negative portrayals.

3. Theoretical Framework of the Study: Intertextuality

The review of literature below focuses on three theorists of intertextuality, namely Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva and Gerard Genette, with the view to applying their concepts to intertextual analysis of female beauty as a symbol of the nation.

3.1. Bakhtin’s Theory of Intertextuality

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of intertextuality, introduced to the West by Julia Kristeva^[3] (p. 15), critiques Saussurean linguistics and Russian formalism by emphasizing the social and class-based nature of language^[3] (p. 15). His concept of the utterance rejects “abstract objectivism,” stressing context-specific communication^[3] (p. 16). For Bakhtin, meaning is inherently dialogic shaped by social, ideological, and subject-

tive contexts and depends on prior discourse and anticipated responses^[5] (p. 19).

Dialogism, central to Bakhtin's framework, treats language as a "two-sided act" involving speaker, listener, addresser, and addressee (Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1978: p. 86, quoted in^[5] (p. 20). This interplay is exemplified by the carnivalesque, where subversive practices (masks, profanity, grotesque imagery) challenged monologic social norms^[2, 4] (p. 22). The novel, as the modern inheritor of this tradition, thrives on heteroglossia, polyphony, and hybridization^[6-9], cited in^[3] (p. 22). Polyphony, for instance, captures conflicting worldviews within a narrative, as every utterance bears traces of prior discourses^[6, 7] (pp. 93-94).

Bakhtin's theory frames meaning as a struggle between monologic (dominant) and dialogic (subversive) forces, with the novel embodying the latter through its satirical, parodic, and multi-voiced nature^[8], quoted in^[3] (p. 22);^[2] (p. 272)

3.2. Kristeva's Theory of Intertextuality

Julia Kristeva's theory, articulated in "*Word, Dialogue and Novel*," builds on Bakhtin's *dialogism* the idea that language is socially embedded and multi-voiced^[10, 11]. She conceptualizes literary texts along two axes: the *horizontal* (subject-addressee interaction) and the *vertical* (the text's relation to broader discourse)^[3]. The "word" operates at the intersection of three dimensions: the author, reader, and external texts.

Kristeva argues that texts are inherently intertextual, asserting: "*Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another*"^[10] (p. 310). This mosaic-like structure demands readerly engagement with intertextual references to grasp evoked desires and meanings. In "*The Bounded Text*," she refines this view, defining the text as a *translinguistic* apparatus that redistributes language and permutes prior texts^[10].

Later, Kristeva introduces "*transposition*" to clarify how meaning shifts across signifying systems, emphasizing the reconfiguration of *thetic* (referential) and *semiotic* (polyvalent) dimensions^[11].

3.3. Genette's Theory of Intertextuality

Gérard Genette's structuralist theory of intertextuality, developed across *The Architext*^[12], *Palimpsests*^[13], and

Paratexts^[14], introduces the umbrella concept of "transtextuality" divided into five categories^[14]. Intertextuality proper involves direct textual co-presence through quotation, plagiarism, or allusion^[14], quoted in^[3] (p. 10). Paratextuality encompasses peripheral elements (peritext: titles, prefaces) and external materials (epitext: interviews, reviews) that shape reception^[15]. Metatextuality addresses a text's relationship to critical commentary, while architextuality examines genre conventions and reader expectations^[15]. Hypertextuality describes transformative relationships between texts (e.g., Ulysses grafting onto the Odyssey)^[15]. Together with Bakhtin's dialogism and Kristeva's intertextuality, Genette's framework reveals how female beauty operates as national symbol: dialogism exposes competing discourses on the female body; intertextuality tracks cultural transformations of beauty ideals; and transtextuality analyzes power dynamics in paratexts and adaptations that construct national identity through feminine representation.

4. Methodology of the Study

This study adopts an intertextual methodology to examine the symbolic representation of feminine beauty as a national allegory in four Ethiopian English-language novels from the 1970s: *The Thirteenth Sun*, *Warrior King*, *Defiance*, and *Firebrands*. The novels were selected based on three key criteria: their temporal setting during Ethiopia's transformative socio-political decade, their foregrounding of female characters whose physical beauty serves as metaphorical extensions of national identity, and their capacity for generating intertextual dialogues both within Ethiopian literary tradition and across global narratives. Through close textual analysis, the research interrogates how aesthetic ideals of femininity are constructed, deployed, and subverted within these narratives, paying particular attention to recurring motifs, cultural norms, and historical contingencies that inform these representations. The methodology combines thematic analysis of beauty's dual symbolic function - as both a unifying emblem of national pride and a destabilizing object of desire - with comparative examination of patterns and variations across texts. By tracing literary allusions and contextualizing findings within Ethiopia's post-imperial revolutionary context, the study reveals how these novels employ feminine beauty as a contested semiotic space where competing

discourses of gender, power and national identity converge. This approach not only illuminates the complex interplay between aesthetic representation and ideological meaning in Ethiopian literature, but also demonstrates how intertextual analysis can uncover the layered significations of beauty as it circulates between cultural memory and contemporary social imagination.

5. Interpretation and Discussion

An intertextual analysis of the representation of female beauty in the four Ethiopian novels reveals a tendency towards negative or destructive images in Dagniachew's *The Thirteenth Sun*^[16] and Abbie's *Defiance*^[17]. However, the negative portrayal of female beauty is not a major theme in Sahle Sellassie's post-Revolutionary novels, *Firebrands*^[18] and *Warrior King*^[19]. Rather, the novels present a different perspective. Because of this, the chosen texts' treatment of the theme of beauty adopts a broad perspective that considers both positive and negative representations, as opposed to focusing only on negative ones. Sections of the analyses examine both the outer physical characteristics and the inner beauty of the main characters to determine how these stunning female characters represent the country or motherland in the novel narratives, as presented in the subsections that follow.

5.1. Images of Female Beauty in *The Thirteenth Sun*

In Dagniachew Worku's *The Thirteenth Sun*, Fitawrary Woldu, a sick feudal lord, makes a six-day pilgrimage to Abbo Church and Mount Zekwala seeking a cure but dies after five days. During the pilgrimage, his daughter Woynitu, noted for her beauty especially her enticing smile, golden teeth, and captivating eyes is brutally raped by a peasant. Her beauty, described by Goytom as "And she just gave him [the peasant] a simple smile, showing off her golden teeth, and let him take her hand in his"^[16] (p. 24), symbolizes both admiration and vulnerability that leads to her tragic victimization.

In addition, Goytom has conflicting feelings of love and resentment for Woynitu, his half-sister. He says that her physical attractiveness is a way she shows her love, but he

also conceals his discontent and resentment, as evidenced by his extreme jealousy of another character. Goytom struggles with incestuous desires and contradictory emotions, which are reflected in his complex emotional state:

... I love Woynitu's transfixing eyes. I Love her smile with that gold tooth shining in her mouth. And I love them all in a languishing way. ...

And now the boor is holding her hand – looking at her from the corners of his eyes and looking as though he wanted to carry her across on his arms, to swallow her whole, to eat her up like his soup of cabbage and *injera*. Oh, I don't know. I wish the earth would open and swallow him, hands and legs. or that I were a leopard to tear him down in my turn ...^[16] (p. 25)

The need for Goytom to protect Woynitu from the peasant and his jealous feelings for her are highlighted in this section. Goytom's vivid imagery of wanting to swallow Woynitu whole and his wish for the earth to open up and swallow the peasant demonstrate his intense emotions and willingness to go to great lengths to keep her safe. All things considered, Woynitu's beauty is described and portrayed in the quotes as enticing Goytom and evoking strong emotions of desire, longing, and protectiveness. This is the focus of the entirety of Goytom's narration of chapter 9^[16] (pp. 30–32).

Woynitu, walking ahead, looked beautiful. I didn't understand why she wanted to be an air hostess perhaps because of the tourists or the big conferences. She had the potential to stand out, attracting attention from powerful men and helping her country. She could train other girls and introduce me to influential people.

She could also work at Africa Hall, earning a good income. Together, we could enjoy life, discussing national and international matters^[16] (p. 31).

The excerpt from *The Thirteenth Sun* emphasizes Woynitu's beauty and Goytom's fascination with her. He describes her as "lovely" and so captivating that he feels "the impulse to soar into the sky alongside her, just like doves and pigeons do"^[16] (p. 30). This imagery suggests that

Woynitu's striking appearance enchants those around her, making her seem almost ethereal and deeply admired.

At the same time, Woynitu's beauty is portrayed as a means to attract the attention and wealth of "big men," who would lavish money on her, benefiting her, her mother, and her country^[16] (p. 30). However, this admiration is tinged with objectification, as Goytom focuses on her physical traits as tools for financial gain, reducing her to a mere object of desire. This depiction diminishes her agency and individuality, framing her primarily as a symbol of allure and economic opportunity rather than a fully realized person.

Though I didn't care for industry, I couldn't help but think about it on such a beautiful morning. Woynitu could join Ethiopian Airlines and forget about being overlooked by Fitawrary. Once she became wealthy, he'd acknowledge her as his daughter, and perhaps even disown me, putting me on equal footing with her admirers. Life seemed simple and easy on mornings like this.

As the sun rose, the sounds of the morning faded. Fitawrary came out of the hut, carried on a litter, heading toward the lake. I realized they hadn't waited for me, so I went in to eat, then followed them.^[16] (p. 32)

The narrative frames Woynitu as a national symbol of Ethiopia, her beauty mirroring the country's natural splendor, cultural richness, and spiritual heritage ("Beautiful face... Beautiful national dress"; "Ethiopia is God's country"). Yet this idealized representation turns tragic: her rape and the ensuing violence Fitawrary Woldu's vengeful killing of the rapist and his own death expose the destructiveness of objectified beauty. The events metaphorize feudalism's and capitalism's collapse, with Fitawrary and the peasant embodying these failing ideologies.

Woynitu's duality echoes figures like Bathsheba and Helen of Troy, whose beauty inspired admiration and ruin. These intertextual parallels critique the reduction of women to symbols, underscoring the need for autonomy. Ultimately, her character encapsulates Ethiopia's paradoxes: beauty as a source of unity and dynamism, yet also of conflict and ideological dissolution.

5.2. Images of Female Beauty in Warrior King

In *Warrior King*, Sahle Sellassie presents two contrasting depictions of female beauty through the characters of Attetegeb (Tewodros' mother) and Tewabech (his wife). Attetegeb's beauty, though not explicitly described as "beautiful," manifests through its disruptive power. This is evident when Dejach Maru, the governor, becomes infatuated after seeing her dance during the Epiphany festival, leading him to make an inappropriate proposal to her husband, Hailu: "Dejach Maru made an impolite suggestion to Hailu, asking him to sell his wife"^[17] (p. 2). This moment underscores how Attetegeb's allure becomes a source of danger, destabilizing her family and symbolizing the risks of objectified female beauty.

In contrast, Tewabech's beauty is repeatedly emphasized both in her name, which means "the beautiful one," and in multiple passages describing her physical charm^[17] (p. 40, 41, 42, 43, 51, 53, 56, 58, 65). Unlike Attetegeb, her beauty serves a political purpose; Queen Menen sees her as an ideal candidate to win over Kassa (Tewodros), illustrating how female attractiveness can be weaponized for power (16). While Attetegeb's beauty brings chaos, Tewabech's reinforces unity and legitimacy, reflecting the novel's broader themes of gender, ambition, and nation-building. Together, these portrayals demonstrate beauty's dual role as both a destabilizing force and a strategic asset in historical narratives.

'Yes, I remember everything distinctly. It was said that the governor proposed to pay five hundred Maria Theresa dollars to the poor husband if he would agree to divorce his wife. And how shocking that was to all decent people in our area!'^[17] (p. 20)

In *Warrior King*, female beauty manifests in contrasting symbolic dimensions through Attetegeb and Tewabech. Attetegeb's dangerous allure precipitates ethical transgressions, exemplified by her costly divorce that fractures familial and social bonds, framing beauty as a destructive force when weaponized for personal gain. Conversely, Tewabech's celebrated beauty etymologically encoded in her name ("the beautiful one") and amplified by noble lineage operates as

political currency. Her strategic marriage to Kassa, endorsed by Queen Menen as both romantic and geopolitical calculus, embeds her attractiveness within Ethiopia's tradition of dynastic alliances. These dual portrayals crystallize beauty's Janus-faced potential: a destabilizing temptation versus an instrument of national cohesion, with Tewabech's charm specifically enhancing her husband's political capital through socially sanctioned desirability.

Together, Attetegeb and Tewabech represent contrasting dimensions of female beauty one as a source of chaos, the other as a tool for alliance and national continuity. Additionally, Tewabech's attractiveness is probably a factor in her marriage to Kassa because her alluring charm would benefit their political partnership:

Political marriage was not uncommon in the Ethiopian past, nor is it uncommon today. For years it had been used as a weapon with which to emasculate men with brave hearts, and to bring them around to one's side. And so Ras Ali could persist in his disagreement for long. 'With her rich experience in political affairs mother can't be wrong,' he thought, and finally he agreed^[17] (p. 37).

The reigning queen, Woizero Menen, also referred to as "The Woman of Gondar," arranged the marriage of her granddaughter Tewabech, who was renowned for her extraordinary beauty, and Kassa Hailu, a valiant rebel leader, in order to carry out the political maneuvers and schemes of the court and royal family. The thoughtful arrangement of this marriage bond served the ruling family's strategic objectives:

The Gondares gossiping about the proposed marriage had mixed reactions some were interested, others envious, and some simply amazed. However, Kassa Hailu was not pleased. He questioned why he, of all people, was being targeted. He believed the proposal was a trap to get him to betray the cause, marry Woizero Menen's daughter, and join the ruling family, thus committing political suicide.

The rebels' cause was clear: to overthrow the government of Woizero Menen and Ras Ali, reunite the country's provinces, reclaim lost territories along the Sudan border and Red Sea coast, and restore the Ethiopian Empire to its former glory. Their ideology aimed to fill the ideological void left by the warring princes and establish a new direction for the country. Under Kassa's leadership, the core of the rebels became a group of nationalists determined to reshape Ethiopia^[17] (pp. 40–41).

The passage from *Warrior King* explores themes of political strategy, personal conviction, and the symbolic role of female beauty. Kassa Hailu's skepticism about a proposed union highlights his resistance to using marriage as a political tool, reflecting broader critiques of tactical alliances. Despite this, he marries the beautiful Tewabech and later becomes Emperor Tewodros II.

Tewabech and Attetegeb symbolize contrasting aspects of Ethiopia. Tewabech represents the nation's idealized beauty and potential for unity, while Attetegeb, whose beauty leads to destructive actions, symbolizes the dangers of exploiting physical attractiveness. Together, they reflect the nation's dualities its aspirations and its vulnerabilities.

5.3. Images of Female Beauty in Defiance

A historical novel, Abbie's *Defiance*^[17], is set in Ethiopia during the fascist Occupation Period (1936–1941). It portrays the heroic deeds of patriotic Fitawrari Abesha and his family, as well as the collective sacrifices made by their fellow citizens in the struggle for freedom. Fitawrari Abesha and his spouse, who had already lost three of their boys at the Battle of Maichew, tragically perished in the fight against the fascist invaders. The novel uses Lady Wesenie, Aster, and Sara two children of Fitawrari Abesha whose roles are crucial for the nation to symbolically highlight the destructive imagery of female beauty. However, the analysis focuses on Aster's attractiveness and her importance to the nation. First of all, as some of the novel's quotations make clear, Fitawrari Abesha's wife and their two daughters are lovely characters in the story:

“Go in peace! You are right!” said the general.

Everyone was surprised at the unexpected decision. Yrgu added congratulations at the end of the sentence.

The old man bowed to the general. Lady Wesenie, Aster, and Sarah stood among the crowd, hurried to where the general could see them, and they bowed and kissed the floor.

The general stared at them.

“Who are these women?” he said.

“I think the old lady is his wife and the other two are their daughters,” said Yrgu.

“Yes!” said one of the guards.

The general was struck by their beauty, especially Aster’s. But he subdued his emotion.

“Go in peace,” repeated the general.

The *fitawrari* and his family bowed once again^[18] (pp. 15–16).

The extract highlights both the collective sacrifices of citizens and the personal heroism of Fitawrari Abesha’s family in the fight against Nazi invaders. Having lost three sons at Maichew, Fitawrari Abesha and his wife also died for the cause. His daughters, Lady Wesenie, Aster, and Sara, symbolize both patriotic strength and the complex, often destructive symbolism of feminine beauty.

The narrative focuses on Aster’s beauty and its national significance. The courtroom scene, where the general unexpectedly responds to Fitawrari’s defiant remarks with humor, shocks the audience and underscores the emotional tension. The daughters’ graceful act of bowing and kissing the floor captivates all, further emphasizing how beauty, dignity, and sacrifice are intertwined in the story. But he manages his emotions in return:

George’s son charged at the *fitawrari*, landing a blow to his chest, causing the old man to stagger. Aster, in a wild outburst, attacked the son, pulling his hair and tearing at him. The son punched her, causing her nose to bleed, but Aster,

undeterred, fought back fiercely, scratching, biting, and spitting, leaving George’s son crying in pain^[18] (pp. 15–16).

Aster, who is initially described as a beautiful girl, turns fierce and wild in response to aggression in the lengthy passage above, signifying strength, resiliency, and a fierce protective instinct. She gets into a physical fight with her opponent, showing off her animalistic tendencies and biting at her with her nails and teeth. This imagery challenges preconceived notions by connecting Aster’s beauty to wild power, but it also emphasizes the physical cost and loss of innocence by being juxtaposed with violence and bloodshed. In the end, the passage implies that feminine beauty can represent traits of strength and a primal connection in addition to aesthetic appeal, challenging conventional notions and displaying the ability for fierce protection:

The general, observing the intense struggle between Aster and the young man, ordered the carabinieri to intervene. Aster and the half-caste were pulled apart, both panting heavily from the fight. The general then noticed Aster’s beauty despite her disheveled state and bleeding nose, grudgingly admiring her courage.

He turned to the carabinieri and ordered the old man to be taken to jail, alongside those sentenced to death. The carabinieri pushed the old man as Lady Wesenie and her daughters left, wailing as tears streamed down their faces^[18] (pp. 17–18).

In Defiance, Aster embodies resilient beauty, suffering yet resisting fascist oppression her courageous assassination of a general mirroring biblical Esther’s strategic use of beauty to save her people. Unlike Bathsheba, whose allure brought tragedy, Aster transforms beauty into revolutionary weaponry. These intertextual parallels (Esther’s salvation, Bathsheba’s seduction) reveal beauty’s dual potential: Aster’s defiance nationalizes it as resistance, Esther channels it diplomatically, while Bathsheba’s tale warns of its peril. Together, they demonstrate how feminine beauty shapes national narratives as shield, sword, or sacrifice.

5.4. Images of Female Beauty in Firebrands

In his novel *Firebrands*^[18], Sahle Sellassie depicts the historical revolution against Ethiopia's imperial regime, introducing three notable female characters: Woizero Tarikua, the official wife of Kebret; Woizero Kassech, the official wife of Dejazmach Azbete; and Woizero Debritu, the mother of Worku and Bezuneh. Relationships bind the last two of these women together: "Dejazmach Azbete and his wife were the first to arrive in the early evening. Woizero Kassech, whose wife Azbete was closely related to, was Tarikua's friend^[19] (p. 13). Notably, the author makes light of Woizero Kassech's greed while subtly implying Tarikua's inner beauty:

Woizero Kassech was a bulky woman of about forty-five. She was immense in volume and in weight. Tarikua, on the other hand, was slim and handsome in features. Her face was a trifle too long, but she was overall handsome and slim. She looked like a schoolgirl compared with her respectable guest who totally filled the seat she occupied. 'He should know what to do,' Tarikua replied to Kassech's remark. 'I don't have much influence over him, as you know.' So saying, she pushed a fancy drinking glass towards Kassech. Her fingers were slender and long, and a white gold ring flashed in the lamp-light as she pushed the glass on the mica-coated table.

'You have to influence him, dear. That's why you are his wife,' Kassech said, lifting the glass to taste the liquor. 'I know that Kebret is a little reserved about such matters, but you have to urge him not to be bashful, you know what I mean, dear,' she giggled more^[19] (pp. 17–18).

In Sahle Sellassie's *Firebrands*, the contrasting portrayals of Woizero Kassech and Woizero Tarikua reveal societal biases in beauty standards. Kassech, described as "hefty," embodies negative stereotypes associated with larger bodies, while Tarikua's slender, radiant appearance aligns with conventional ideals of desirability. Her beauty is further linked to power her ability to subtly influence her husband reflects expectations of women leveraging charm for control. This extends to her daughter Mimi, whose inherited attractiveness perpetuates ideals of youth and vitality.

Beyond personal appeal, Tarikua's elegance symbolizes Ethiopia itself, her grace mirroring the nation's potential and natural beauty. Her wifely guidance parallels civic duty, framing feminine allure as both a personal and national asset. The passage thus critiques how society ties female worth to appearance and indirect power, while also using beauty as a metaphor for national pride and collective responsibility.

5.5. Comparative Intertextual Analysis of Female Beauty in the Four Novels

The exploration of female beauty in Ethiopian literature is a significant aspect of understanding how societal and cultural norms shape perceptions of women. In novels such as *The Thirteenth Sun*^[16], *Warrior King*^[19], *Defiance*^[17], and *Firebrands*^[18], the depiction of beauty serves as a lens through which themes of identity, power, and social roles are examined. These novels present varied portrayals of beauty, ranging from its association with tragedy and conflict to its connection with strength, resistance, and harmony with nature. The nuanced ways in which beauty is depicted across these works reflect the complex nature of female identity and its influence on societal expectations in Ethiopia. Each novel offers a unique perspective, contributing to a broader understanding of how beauty functions within the cultural context and its role in shaping the lives and struggles of female characters.

In *The Thirteenth Sun*, women's beauty is often viewed negatively, acting as a symbol for a source of grief and disaster. This is reminiscent of well-known figures like Helen of Troy, whose beauty sparked the Trojan War, and is consistent with the greater literary idea that beauty can bring tragedy. This novel's portrayal of beauty, which emphasizes the potentially harmful aspects of female appeal, contributes to a cultural narrative that sees beauty as both feared and revered.

Compared to *The Thirteenth Sun*, *Warrior King* presents a more nuanced picture of feminine beauty by fusing inner strength and resistance with external physical beauty. The positive attributes of beauty are strongly emphasized in the book, and it is connected to morally admirable characteristics like courage. This contrast respects the entire selves of the female protagonists and reflects a cultural conception of beauty that transcends physical attributes.

Defiance takes a different tack when addressing the topic of destructive beauty than *The Thirteenth Sun* does. In this case, social unrest and internal conflict are attributed to beauty. The female characters in *Defiance* struggle with their physical attractiveness, which creates a conflict ground for social expectations and power struggles. This portrayal emphasizes the complex role that beauty plays in interpersonal relationships and self-identity, as well as the conflicts that arise from both the inside and outside of it.

Firebrands takes a broader view by considering beauty in connection to the natural world and other narrative elements. The book provides an integrative perspective that sees beauty as a continuation of the natural order, highlighting the peaceful coexistence of human beauty and the natural world. Compared to the more contradictory representations found in *The Thirteenth Sun* and *Defiance*, this representation provides a more upbeat and thorough understanding of beauty.

5.5.1. Comparative Insights

The intertextual analysis reveals notable theme parallels and contrasts among the four novels:

- **Negative Connotations:** While *The Thirteenth Sun* and *Defiance* approach the subject from different perspectives (internal human struggle versus external societal influence), they both highlight the potentially detrimental aspects of female beauty.
- **Positive Portrayals:** More optimistic definitions of beauty are put forth by *Warrior King* and *Firebrands*, who associate it with moral attributes and natural equilibrium, respectively.
- **Holistic Characterization:** In all of the novels, an effort is made to depict female beauty not only as physical characteristics but also as an essential part of the character's identity and sense of morality.

5.5.2. Cultural and Societal Implications

The various ways that these books portray feminine beauty relate to more general cultural and societal themes in Ethiopian literature, highlighting the following:

- **Cultural Ambivalence:** When it comes to beauty, there is an underlying conflict between fear and adoration.

- **Social Pressures:** The novels emphasize the challenges women face in managing the expectations that are put on them as a result of their beauty.
- **Symbolism and Identity:** Stories and character lives are influenced by beauty in a variety of ways. It is an effective metaphor for exploring morality, identity, and the workings of society.

6. Conclusion

An intricate web of representations that capture the cultural awe and complexity of beauty is revealed by a comparative intertextual analysis of female beauty in these four Ethiopian novels. The method first highlights the ambivalence that cultures have toward beauty, which communicates both fear and adoration. This contradiction is seen in the way that beauty is portrayed in various contexts; it is sometimes extolled and idealized and other times it is treated with caution and skepticism. This ambivalence reflects broader cultural beliefs and suggests a multifaceted and complex view of beauty within Ethiopian society.

Second, as women negotiate the idea of beauty, the novels show the expectations and pressures society places on them. These literary works depict how women manage the demands made on their appearance, usually managing to strike a balance between those expectations and the respect that they are given by society. The characters offer a deep commentary on the relationship between gender, appearance, and societal conventions through their experiences, giving readers a peek of the problems Ethiopian women might encounter in the real world.

Finally, these novels examine identity, morality, and social relationships using beauty as a powerful symbol. Through their varied portrayals of female beauty, the novels show how a character's outward look can influence and mirror deeper aspects of their personality and moral compass. Larger societal changes and power dynamics can be investigated through the symbolic application of beauty, providing insight into the emergence and development of personal and collective identities. In summary, a thorough and nuanced understanding of how beauty is entwined with larger themes of identity, power, and social change is provided by the com-

parative intertextual analysis of female beauty in these four Ethiopian novels.

Author Contributions

Data curation, D.D. and A.G.; Formal analysis, D.D. and A.G.; Conceptualization, A.G.; Funding acquisition, D.D. and A.G.; Investigation, D.D. and A.G.; Methodology, A.G.; Project administration, D.D. and A.G.; Resources D.D. and A.G.; Software, D.D.; Supervision, A.G.; Validation, D.D. and A.G.; Visualization, D.D. and A.G., Writing—original draft, A.G.; Writing—review & editing, D.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Because the study is based on textual analysis, no human subjects are used. The Bahir Dar University research rules, however, provided ethical confirmation for the study, and the university's examining board also assessed the project.

Informed Consent Statement

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and standards. All procedures performed were in compliance with relevant ethical regulations and institutional requirements.

Data Availability Statement

The data extracted from the novel to support the findings of this study are included within the article

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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