



Narrating the Ugandan nation in Mary Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil*

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This article seeks to study how Mary Okurut narrates the Ugandan nation through her novel *The Invisible Weevil* while at the same time exploring how the author centers upon women in her imagination of the new nation. The arguments in this article are derived from concepts proposed by Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, among other scholars, on nationalism. These are arguments that explore the question of identity formation in nations and what holds these nations together in terms of their cultural standpoints and even at times a desire for a better nation for future generations. Through a close textual analysis that focuses on elements of narratology, the study explores the issue of nationalism in the novel. Of interest to this study is how Okurut as a contemporary writer engages history in the novel to narrate the nation and the challenges it faces as it evolves through different and tumultuous leaderships. The narration is undertaken through the viewpoint of various characters who describe different periods, thus creating a channel through which knowledge from each epoch is transmitted by the actions of women who attempt to define a new nation of Uganda that would be devoid of pestilence from 'the invisible weevil'. **Keywords:** nation, narration, Ugandan literature, historiography.

Introduction


In this article, we investigate the concept of nationhood in the novel *The Invisible Weevil* (1998) and how the author, Mary Okurut, wrestles with the question of what constitutes a nation, in particular from a gendered perspective, thereby writing women into the history of Uganda. Nationhood and nationality have been famously explored by Ernest Renan who argues that:

A nation is a soul and spiritual principle. Two things which, in truth, are but one. One lies in the past, another in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form [...] The Nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men [and women], glory, this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. (19)

Renan implies that though a nation may be comprised of different entities in terms of the struggles to create and maintain it, it is a single fabric. Benedict Anderson considers a nation to be an "imagined political community—imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (3). Anderson further argues that terms like *nation*, *nationality*, and *nationalism* have proved difficult to define, or rather to analyze, and calls them cultural artifacts of a particular kind (4). For his part, Homi Bhabha argues that nations are complex organic entities in the sense that they are comprised of people who identify themselves with regard to a specific culture (*Nation and Narration* 9). It is this complex process of cultural identification that subsequently morphs to function as a nation or a people. A nation,


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thus, is a cultural force. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha says that nations function through complex strategies of cultural and discursive addresses which make them subjects of a range of literary narratives (140). He also examines the concept *nation* as both historically-determined and general. He reiterates that a nation as such refers to the “modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous—the nation—a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging” (45). Even as we write *nation*, Bhabha continues, we cannot ignore the ambivalence of the nation as a strategy of narration which is brought about by the cultural difference in the act of writing it. This sense of ambivalence—the duality that presents a split in the colonized other—creates room for hybridity which acts as a subversion of the dominant cultures. Bhabha further asserts that the series of inclusions and exclusions on which a dominant culture is premised is deconstructed by the very entry of the formerly excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse.

From another angle, Frantz Fanon, writing earlier than Bhabha, argues that the struggle for a national culture cannot occur without first of all fighting for national liberation. He argues that “[t]o fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible” (154). He also affirms that “national culture is the whole body of efforts made by people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that nation has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (168). The native writer, Fanon argues, moves from addressing the oppressor to addressing the people, thereby molding a national consciousness through literature. While Fanon’s idea of a national culture that embraces the whole body of efforts made by all the people sounds all-inclusive, the appearance of the constructed nation in majority cases tends to bear a male face, thereby rendering women’s contribution peripheral. Besides, the very liberation that follows the people’s fight to bring the nation into being has its pitfalls.

Nationalists who take over leadership oftentimes end up betraying the ideals they represented before they assumed power and thereafter embrace the ideals of the oppressors, thus missing the very essence of the nation. Fanon rightly argues that oftentimes the new leaders, whether advertently or inadvertently, aid and abet the bourgeoisie who subsequently plunge into the mire of corruption and pleasure. Fanon’s arguments on the role of the native writer are reflected in Christopher Odhiambo’s argument that “narrating the nation is arguably one of the most evident preoccupations pursued with such obsessive frequency by postcolonial literary writers and critics” (“Whose Nation? Romanticizing the Vision of a Nation in Bole Butake’s ‘Betrothal without Libation’ and ‘Family Saga’” 1). Odhiambo, for his part, moves away from the subject of narrating the nation and focuses on how Bole Butake envisions the Cameroonian nation. He is obviously less concerned with the narrations of nations and more concerned with the ways that the playwright deals with the more salient and elusiveness nature of the literary vision. This vision of nationhood in Butake’s play, Odhiambo concludes, remains “ever romantic” and leads the author to “some kind of utopian vision” (14).

The concerns of narrating the nation also permeate Odhiambo’s examination of the role of memory in narrating the nation in Alex Mukulu’s play *30 Years of Bananas* which traces Uganda’s history from independence in 1962 to 1992 (“Memory, Dialogue and Reconstruction of the Nation” 45). Odhiambo argues that the play explores the importance of the past by revisiting, excavating, re-enacting, and interrogating Uganda’s traumatic memory before seriously beginning the project of national reconstruction (45). In this article, we would like to lean on Odhiambo’s reading of Mukulu’s play, especially his conclusion that “Mukulu seems to suggest that for the nation to move on it must engage with its past in a sincere and open dialogue” (61).

Tirop Simatei offers an almost similar reading regarding Okurut. He reads her as a woman writing in a “period of great political promise and cultural renaissance [...]” (152) and argues that Okurut places women in her novel not as subordinate to men but as equals since they too participated in the formation of the nation: “Okurut’s concern is to show that women occupy political positions in the post-Amin Uganda because they participated in its formation [...]” (156). In this article we acknowledge the arguments by Simatei and Odhiambo and build on them by focusing on the nuances involved in narrating the Ugandan nation. Critics of Okurut’s *The Invisible Weevil* such as Marie Kruger have studied how the novelist imagines the family as the anchor of the nation. Kruger argues that Nkwanzu’s authority as national figure comes from her status as a forgiven wife, nurturing mother, and dutiful daughter-in-law. These arguments give this article a substantive backdrop from which to conduct a critical reading of *The Invisible Weevil*.

A reading of *The Invisible Weevil* reveals the struggles to liberate the nation from oppressive cultures and move it towards a nation that is more accommodating of diverse opinions and encouraging of the growth of its citizens—both male and female—and not at the expense of each other. This, Anderson argues, requires a deep sense

of community between the freedom fighters since the concept of the nation is always conceived of as a deep horizontal comradeship with a fraternity that makes it possible for millions of people to be not so much willing to kill as willing to die for it (7).

The presentation of the Ugandan nation in *The Invisible Weevil*

The Invisible Weevil borrows heavily from the monumental years of the political history of Uganda, especially during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Uganda became a fully independent nation in October 1962 and Sir Edward Mutesa became the first president of Uganda in 1963. Milton Obote abrogated the 1962 constitution in 1967 and declared that the country would have one central government as opposed to the Kabaka kingdoms which were incorporated into the governance structure upon attainment of independence.¹ This, however, was not a voluntary transition since Obote unleashed military power upon the Kabaka kingdoms which led to the death of thousands. Idi Amin Dada, who led the operation against the Kabakas, deposed Obote in 1971 and in 1972 he expelled the Asians and unleashed terror upon intellectuals and symbols of intellectual status such as spectacles, books, and chess sets. During his regime, “[p]ublic order rapidly deteriorated, and murder, destruction, looting, and rape became the hallmarks of the regime” (Kyemba 1). Amin’s invasion of Tanzania in 1978 became the trigger that led to his ousting. Tanzania retaliated and took over Kampala in 1979. After Amin’s escape, Professor Yusuf Lule took over and was replaced by Godfrey Binaisa two months later. Binaisa was replaced by a military commission in 1980 which organized the elections that restored the reign of Obote in the same year amidst claims of widespread rigging. Leading the National Resistance Army (NRA), Yoweri Museveni launched the bush struggle in 1981 which contributed to the ousting of Obote by Tito Okello’s Uganda National Liberation Army in 1985. Okello’s rule was short-lived, however; in January 1986 Museveni’s NRA invaded Kampala and dethroned Okello. Museveni has been Uganda’s president ever since.

These years of political upheavals form the basis of Okurut’s narration in *The Invisible Weevil* where she engages most of these historical moments in Uganda while centering women as people who endeavor to restore order in a country that was led into political and social confusion by male leaders. This is an observation corroborated by Simatei when he notes that Okurut writes in and of a period of great political promise and cultural renaissance where women did not only play secondary roles to men but also participated in the process of the formation of the nation (152). What we read in *The Invisible Weevil* is a narration that weaves the past into the present and the future imaginations of the nation as argued by Odhiambo (“Memory” 47) where he sees memories of the past as important instruments in the imaginations of the future. These memories become backdrops for revisiting and interrogating traumatic experiences before beginning any imaginations of national reconstruction.

Okurut’s narration in the novel is from a female omniscient narrator’s point of view where she introduces us to the protagonists: Kaaka, Genesis, and Nkwanzu. Kaaka is the mother of Genesis—a young man who grew up just after the colonialists left Uganda. Together with his wife—Nkwanzu—it could be argued that both were and are witnesses to the becoming of the nation of Uganda. This is so because both grew up and went to school—at all levels—together. Through their eyes and feelings, we get to not only see a nation that is coming to terms with its identity but also the feelings that drive this process of cementing a desirable national identity. Nkwanzu and Genesis are at the center of the author’s imagination of the new Uganda.

In her novel, Okurut succeeds in constructing the image of a country that is struggling to rectify its mistakes and create a better future for its citizens. Uganda is presented as a nation that is perpetually in conflict with its various constituent elements. Kaaka becomes a representation of the conflicts that characterized pre-independent Uganda such as conflicts against patriarchal institutions. Some conflicts are not entirely harmful since some are aimed towards restructuring the society for the good. These conflicts are represented by Nkwanzu, Mama, and the younger generation who begin and support an underground struggle for a more stable and accommodative nation. The retrogressive conflicts which are mostly represented by the political conflicts lead to the death and destabilization of the country while the progressive conflicts are presented by women who seek to restore social order. Whereas the men are pitted against one another in orchestrating coups and counter coups which lead to a degeneration of the society, women are depicted as characters who come out to correct this wrong and create a better society for future generations.

Narrating the nation in *The Invisible Weevil*

Kaaka, who begins the narration, is at the periphery of the new nation, as has always been the culture, but the writer centers her as the story progresses, perhaps to foreground the ideal spirit of the new nation that will be all-inclusive. Apparently, the new nation aspires to capture women's participation as they take on key roles in the building of the Ugandan nation. Kaaka's story, thus, comes out as a story of women empowerment. She assumes the role of a historian in the novel by retrospectively narrating to Nkwanzu how life used to be during the colonial and the pre-colonial times. Kaaka is presented as the historian who prioritizes revisiting and re-enacting the memories of the past before any meaningful dialogue of future imaginations of the nation is embarked upon. The perception herein is that Kaaka seems to be the reader's point of contact with the history of Uganda before Genesis and Nkwanzu were born. Through her story we get to understand how the country came to be as it is in the novel. To some extent, Kaaka grounds the reader's understanding of Uganda as it evolves.

As the country evolves, various characters occupy various positions in the history of the country. Kaaka occupies the past. Genesis and Nkwanzu occupy the present and are central figures in the agitation for the new Uganda and its cultural renaissance as suggested by Simatei. Towards the end of the novel, we are introduced to Ihoreere—Nkwanzu's daughter who the author seems to hint occupies the future of the country. This imagining of the future comes after the author has seemingly sufficiently dealt with the past and the present, reflecting Odhiambo's postulation on revisiting the past before embarking on national construction. In narrating the nation, the past, the present, and the future are intertwined. The nation's present builds on its past, as it constructs the future. The past, which Kaaka occupies, is central in our understanding of the narrative temporalities, which are different times of narration, argued for by Genette, *et al.* The past that Kaaka recollects is an anachrony—narrative distortion—which comes as an analepsis/flashback. The analepsis helps us use the past to understand the present and make meaning out of it (33). The reader's understanding of the nation of Uganda during Kaaka's time is a recollection from her memories. Kaaka, in her conversation with Nkwanzu, looks back at what used to be of the Ugandan nation. She gives us a backdrop to the identity of the nation from the coming and the reception of the white man to the nation's infection with the first invisible evil—HIV/AIDS. Kaaka introduces us to the soul of Uganda. She realizes the importance of this part of her country and, as such, she somehow refuses to narrate to Nkwanzu Genesis's past before she lets her know the past of her country. Nkwanzu requests:

Kaaka, you've never told me about his [Genesis's] birth. Why don't you tell me now that he's still sleeping? [...] Let us sit near where we can watch him while I tell you the story of his birth. But I cannot tell you the story of his birth without telling you about my own life as a girl and how I met your father-in-law. (*Invisible Weevil* 10)

It could be argued that, to Kaaka, the nation bore absolute importance compared to Genesis who was almost dying. The nation and its culture would live on, so she felt the importance of passing on not only the memories of the past but also the lived experiences and lessons she picked from this past.

The present, which Nkwanzu and Genesis occupy, is central to our understanding of the concept of time in narratology, especially as espoused by Gunther Muller who looks at the role different time spans such as the past and the present play in any narrative form. Two observations drive the arguments in this part of the article. The first is the argument by Renan where he contends that a nation is a soul and spiritual principle where one lies in the past and the other in the present (10). The one in the past possesses a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Kaaka's place in *The Invisible Weevil* is one that conforms to Renan's argument of what a nation truly is. What emerges from Kaaka's narration is that she does not focus on the kingdoms that existed in pre-colonial Uganda but instead speaks as though the entire nation was one since her days as a young girl. She seems to concur with Renan's argument with regard to the nation being a soul and a spiritual principle. The implication is that the soul and the spirit cannot be divided. Kaaka, in her wisdom, does not seem to point a finger to an imaginary other or even play victim. It could be deduced that the challenges that Kaaka faced were the same as the challenges faced by women in other pre-colonial kingdoms, even though the narration does not divulge this to the reader. What is evident from Kaaka's retrospective narration is that it gives her some agency that comes with reflective narration. By detaching herself from the events she can interpret these events and make judgment about herself and others. What is interesting is that this agency—power—is allocated to Kaaka. She is the custodian of the history of the country.

The second view is Bhabha's argument that the nation is a complex cultural entity in which there exists some sort of power play between the colonizer and the colonized other (*Location of Culture* 201). This power play creates a new breed that occupies a somewhat liminal space and, in turn, gives rise to what Bhabha considers a hybrid. Kaaka occupies an important position in the narrative of *The Invisible Weevil*. If we were to consider Bhabha's perspective, Kaaka occupies a liminal space in the sense that she is neither the colonized nor the colonized other. Kaaka does not belong to the society that she was previously part of and she is also not incorporated into the present society. Largely, she is in the middle, an ambiguous space from where she controls the narratives of the past. By taking us back to the history of Uganda, Kaaka subverts the dominant narrative that women could not be part of history making. It is also worth noting that Kaaka herself was a victim of dominant and retrogressive cultural practices. As such, she falls in the in-between space where she is neither one nor the other. This liminal position in the character of Kaaka gives her some sort of objectivity in her narration since she does not appear to romanticize one side of the divide at the expense of the other. It is also through Kaaka's narration that we get to understand how white people came to Uganda, how they were received and what their activities were. Arguably, it is Kaaka who saw the first white man in her village (11). Kaaka, a woman, is elevated to the level of a discoverer and this further gives her credibility as the custodian of not only her history but also the history of her community. Kaaka's retrospective narration not only introduces us to the coming of the white man but also to the beginnings of economic activities in Buganda (12). It is through yet another flashback (analepsis) that we get to discover this.

In Okurut's imagined community, Kaaka is centered as the bearer of knowledge about the people of Buganda. This assertion is seen by the fact that it is through her that our questions are answered. It is further reinforced by the fact that it is she, Kaaka, who introduces us to the instances when the first weevil was noticed in Buganda and the probable causes of it. Apparently one weevil, explained as HIV/AIDS, was brought about by the cultural practice of wife-sharing among brothers. This was done even though the women did not like or approve of it. As Kaaka puts it, "how could the wife refuse when it was her duty?" (13). Apart from the constant wars that took place then, Kaaka attributes the massive death of her people to the invisible weevil. She says: "That's one reason why this weevil is killing many of our people" (13). The weevil is sustained in the community by the customary practice of wife-sharing and also by fathers-in-law sleeping with the brides of their sons so as to approve of the marriage. It is also sustained by beliefs that it is some sort of witchcraft and, to cure it, witchdoctors embark on a spree of cutting each family member of the infected with the same razor blade that was used to cut the infected. By cutting them and filling the cuts with herbs, the witchdoctor believes that he has succeeded in getting rid of the weevil, unaware that he has just fanned the fire.

The Invisible Weevil reveals Okurut's stance in positioning women at the center of national history. Okurut engages in historiography—which in this case is the narration of the histories of individuals or places. This reflection goes against reflections by other scholars such as Evan Mwangi and Abasi Kiyimba who largely focus on the political environment and the victimhood of women, ignoring the triumphs and the organization women show in liberating Uganda. Mwangi (1) argues that the novel is a satirical account of women's dependency on men as well as a nation's blind belief in frauds as messiahs. He further notes that Okurut captures Africa's regional politics, bringing out the spirit of regionalism in toppling dictatorial regimes, and the ascendancy of demagogues like the illiterate Duduma, alluding to Idi Amin's destruction of Uganda and the seeming reconstruction of the nation. On the other hand, Kiyimba reads the novel as a comprehensive protest against various levels of violence and suffering by women. He argues that it is the system that elevates men that makes Genesis and Nkwanzu have different values regarding virginity and concludes that women in the novel are either victims of the system, its accomplices, or fighters against it (198–200).

However, we argue that the weevils that Okurut revisits are so much part of the construction of the Uganda nation that they cannot be sidestepped in discussing the nation. It is through Kaaka's recollection of the weevil of HIV/AIDS that we get to appreciate what Renan refers to as the "rich legacy of memories" (10) and the soul and the spiritual principle. He further argues that the past and the present are two things which are actually one and are unified by the said soul or principle. This unification is evident in the conversation between the two women, Kaaka and Nkwanzu, at the start of the novel. The former passes age-old knowledge to the latter who occupies the present; Kaaka acts as a conduit of information from the past and an exemplification of Renan's "rich legacy of memories" and further still the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. This heritage is undivided because Kaaka's narration does not seem to malign one side—the patriarchal—but rather just tells the story without any adulteration.

One could, however, also argue that perhaps Kaaka had somehow accepted her fate and adopted a self-defeatist approach to her story but this would not be so. Kaaka knows the power she wields as a member of the nation and does not spend it speaking against the men of her generation but instead speaks of her nation. Okurut grants Kaaka the power to look at the bigger picture regarding her heritage and make sure that she propagates it in an undivided form. Kaaka thus appears to be retaining the soul and the spiritual principle of the nation. The long past made of sacrifices is evident in Kaaka's life who bears it all in her youth and adulthood without resistance or questioning. This idea of a nation being entrenched in the memory of a people and its cultural significance is further corroborated by Miroslav Hroch who argues that a nation is created fundamentally upon three issues, one of them being "a memory of a common past" which is viewed as the "destiny of the group" (88). This memory of a common past is shared between Kaaka and Nkwanzu through whom we see the steps the nation has taken to be as it is.

Odhiambo's argument that for the nation to move on it must engage with its past in a sincere and open dialogue opens the channel for my examination of the present in this article. Kaaka, as argued, becomes the prioritization of the past in the process of national imagination. The present is occupied by Nkwanzu, her contemporaries, and Genesis, her husband. It is a present that one could argue contradicts Renan's notion of perpetuating the value of the heritage received in an undivided form and also clearly reflects Simatei's idea of "cultural renaissance" (152) and the placement of women as co-contributors, not just subordinates to men, in the process of nation formation.

The cultural renaissance in the novel involves women making their voices heard and breaking the silences that characterized the past. This happens because Nkwanzu and her contemporaries, being aware of the sacrifices and endeavors of their forbears, strive for something more. One comes to realize from the narration that the present which Nkwanzu occupies is a present not of silence but of strife. It is a present that contrasts to Kaaka's past. Nkwanzu's present is marked by questioning and seeking of solutions to the challenges that face not only the women but also the nation. This spirit of strife and questioning is not the preserve of Nkwanzu alone. When she joins the university we get to see it in the friends she makes: Mama, who leads the underground revolution; Rex, who is part of this revolution though he falters once he tastes the trappings of power and ends up selling out his comrades in the struggle; and even lecturers and fellow students at the University. It is this group that agitates for change at the risk of their lives and also embodies Renan's argument that the sacrifices of our forbearers are the fabric that knits the spirit of nationalism.

As we further examine the question of nationalism in *The Invisible Weevil*, we find it important to consider the arguments of Timothy Brennan about the post-war novel. In *The Nation Longing for Form*, Brennan argues that there is uniqueness in the post-war novel due to the fact of the insurgent nationalism that occupies it. Further still, he argues that: "The idea of nationhood is not only a political idea but a formal binding together of disparate elements. And out of the multiplicities of culture, race, and political structures, grows also a repeated dialectic uniformity and specificity: of world culture and national culture, of family and of people" (173). Brennan's argument that nationhood is not exclusively a political idea, but a unification of several elements is at the core of *The Invisible Weevil*. While it is indeed true that the novel narrates the political history of Uganda, it also narrates the cultural history, which is rooted in the family unit as well as other social institutions. The political idea in Brennan's argument is seen in the history of coups that are evident in the novel. The coups that take place become the points from which we can center the political idea of nationhood while also not ignoring the disparate elements that enable the reader to determine the identity of the nation that the author wants.

It is also from these coups that we get to understand Fanon's argument that fighting for national culture means "fighting for the liberation of the nation" (154) which is the material keystone upon which national culture is built. The progression of these coups also suggests the argument of the disenfranchisement of the people by their leaders. People put their trust in leaders who fought for their independence and after independence the said leaders turned their backs on the people. Fanon contends:

The people who for years on end have seen this leader and heard him speak, who [...] have followed his contests with the colonial power, spontaneously put their trust in this patriot. Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty, and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land, and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie. (157)

It is true that Ugandans in the novel felt marginalized by the colonial master and this subjugation is what necessitated the agitation for independence. This disenfranchisement is later substituted with a sense of a rather reckless euphoria at the attainment of independence which is evident when the narrator points out that:

Meanwhile, reports were coming in from all parts of the country about how people had received independence. Some lay in the middle of the road and refused to move, declaring that they were independent. Quite a number of them were run over by cars and died shouting that they were independent. In Kampala, white men were made to carry bananas on their heads and Ugandans laughed at them. (43)

What is evident from this narration is that the concept of independence was perceived differently by people. Some, in a state of euphoria, thought that independence meant defying some rather common-sense laws such as giving way to vehicles. Others perceived independence to be a time of mocking white people. Apparently, independence meant payback time to this group. Later on in the narration, we discover that President Opolo, who took over from the colonialists, leads an onslaught against the traditional rulers, the Kabaka of Buganda. “Four years after independence [...] Opolo has fought with the Kabaka of Buganda [...] President Opolo has said that the kingdoms are no more” (44). In the first instance independence meant doing away with colonial leadership. Later on, it morphs into doing away with any other form of subsidiary leadership other than the national one.

The successive coups narrated in the novel as the country evolves and creates its own identity are reminiscent of Genette’s analysis of time usage in a novel. He distinguishes between order, duration, and frequency (11). Focusing on order and frequency, one notes that the coups in the novel are somewhat recurrent and follow each other in almost quick succession. An evaluation of the external time in the novel reveals that Okurut borrows heavily from actual historical events to narrate her story. The narrated fictional time between the ascension to power of President Opolo and the attack on the Buganda Kingdoms reflects the factual and historical ascension to power of President Milton Obote and his attack on the factual Kabaka Kingdoms. The parallel that exists between the fictional time and the factual historical time is reflected as such: four years after independence, Opolo unleashes the military against the Kabaka kingdoms. Similarly, factually, four years into Obote’s reign, he unleashed the military against the Kabaka kingdom and revised the constitution to make himself the president:

Dr. Obote became the country’s first prime minister in 1962 at the head of an uneasy coalition between his own Uganda People’s Congress and the Kabaka Yekka or King’s party representing the Baganda [...] Sir Edward Mutesa, better known as “King Freddie”, became president. Four years later Obote ousted the king and revised the constitution to make himself president. (BBC)

Okurut utilizes the principle of external time where historical events are intertwined in fictitious narrations. This comes about when she narrates the second coup that defines the fictitious Uganda (94). Opolo, who had taken over from the colonial masters, is ousted by Duduma, his trusted lieutenant: “‘But who is this Duduma?’ they asked. [...] ‘Duduma is the army commander [...] Duduma entered the force and later on Opolo used him to fight his battles’” (97).

The reign of Duduma subsequently picks up from where the reign of Opolo left off. While Opolo shed the blood of those who paid allegiance to the Kabaka Kingdoms, Duduma’s reign heralds the widespread killing of all those who paid allegiance to Opolo, including fellow soldiers (101–2). As discussed by Alfonso de Toro in *Time Structure in the Contemporary Novel* (2011), the concept of time in narratology is further divided into external time, which is time outside the novel; empirical and historical time of the author; and internal time which in the novel is constituted within act time and text time (113). Okurut disrupts the narration of the coups such that in between the attainment of independence and the ousting of Opolo by Duduma (45–94) the narrator takes us through the lives of Nkwanzu meeting Genesis, the experiences of Nkwanzu in high school, and her process of becoming a woman. This perhaps is to highlight the need to revisit the nation’s present represented by Nkwanzu and her contemporaries, at least a change from the disillusioning narration of a nation of coups. The history of bloodshed that characterized the presidencies of Opolo and Duduma which also parallels the history of Uganda seems to have been detrimental to the unification of the nation. Okurut engages the reader with this narration to chronicle the nation as it made progress towards becoming a stable democracy. History in the novel is not just for mere purposes of narration but for the purposes of taking stock of the past, the present, and also setting ground for future aspirations with women at the center of the process of stabilizing the nation.

At the core of Brennan's argument is the paradox of finding unity in differences. It is an argument that seems to project the different elements of a nation that make up its fabric. A nation, thus, cannot exist and define itself as a singular entity, i.e. ignoring the political and favoring the cultural. All these elements work together to create and sustain the fabric of nationhood. These disparate elements and the multiplicities of cultures and political structures are evident where the nation seeks to create a singular identity, to identify itself as democratic and free from corruption as the characters try to define themselves as individuals and not as communities. The omniscient narrator narrates the lives of Nkwanzu and Genesis both in the villages and in the city. It is a narration that brings to light the life of Nkwanzu as an individual while growing up and going to school to the point where her path intersects with Genesis' and they begin their courtship before getting married. The narrator adopts a simultaneous and a subsequent narration. In the simultaneous narration, she narrates events in the present and as they occur, while in the subsequent narration, she narrates events from the past that have somehow shaped the present. This is evident when Nkwanzu seeks to know of the birth of Genesis but Kaaka insists that she cannot tell her of Genesis until she tells her of her own life as a girl.

The novel shifts between the present and the past as the narrator shifts between the two temporal positions, thus inviting the reader to connect the two plot lines and actively participate in making sense out of the story. While narrating the history of Uganda from the 1960s to early 1990s, the novel captures the metaphorical three 'weevils' that bedevil the country over that period: the subjugation of women by a harsh patriarchal culture, the AIDS pandemic, and the turbulent leadership. Since we cannot divorce our historical happenings from our national identity and vice versa, the three weevils remain a permanent part of the Ugandan nation. Genette's concept of external time in narratological analysis affirms this where factual historical events are applied in fictitious narrations. *The Invisible Weevil* is a novel that takes us through the process of creating a sense of national identity. The narrator ropes the reader into the life of Nkwanzu to show the progress women are making not only in relation to the political future of Uganda but also the cultural future.

The second point of reference in the narration of the nation of Uganda is through Nkwanzu. The character of Nkwanzu in *The Invisible Weevil* is one that shows the shift in the battle against retrogressive cultural practices to the battle against retrogressive political practices. It is largely through Nkwanzu and partly through Kaaka that Okurut demonstrates her concurrence with Fanon in his argument on combat literature where he argues that it "molds national consciousness" (155). This foundation on the philosophy of commitment is also further echoed and reinforced by Fanon when he says that the "native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his/her own people" (155) which is what Okurut does. She does this in her narration by placing women at the center of creating a new Uganda. The women are engaged in the agitation and creation of underground movements that push for leadership reforms. They are aware of their political as well as social responsibilities and remain focused on the task they have at hand.

The women in the novel appear to be fighting the political confusion that is associated with their oppression. It is true that this political turmoil results in the suffering of many women at the hands of the brutal regimes, a trend that Okurut attempts to banish in the new nation. Apparently both the women who are and those who are not associated with the regimes suffer. The irony in this is that while the women who support the soldiers want to live extravagant lives, those who fight for the underground movement prefer simplicity as they fulfill their duties. Mama, the underground movement leader, tells the women in her team that: "From now on you'll wear your hair short and natural. Never hot-comb it" (122). The women of the struggle believe they should be natural and not waste money making artificial images of themselves.

The author seems to imply that for the struggle for political order to be achieved, the women should focus on the task rather than beautifying themselves. Okurut delves not only into restoring social order but also into the political spheres. She presents women as the driving forces for a free and democratic society. She advocates for uniformity and unity among the soldiers of the underground movement through the character of Mama who informs her troops that: "As long as we remain fragmented, the struggle will take longer" (149). While the women are agitating through a united front, the men, led by Duduma, appear to be a group of individuals making reckless decisions such as attacking Tanzania. This move eventually becomes the downfall of Duduma as he is deposed by Polle.

Towards the end of the novel, Okurut shows the reader that she is not just concerned with the process of narrating the lives of two women but also with narrating a history, a present, as well as making it possible for the reader to project into the future. While the history is occupied by Kaaka, the present is occupied by Nkwanzu,

and the future is occupied by Nkwanzu's daughter Ihoreere. It is a future that one cannot be certain of in terms of the challenges that Ihoreere will have to surmount. This is indicated by the question that Nkwanzu asks herself, wondering whether her daughter will stand the invisible weevils (203). Kaaka, as argued earlier, accepted her place in the society as a woman. It is through bearing the history of her nation and her community that she gets to redeem herself. This knowledge accords her agency which the society had robbed her of by denigrating women.

Nkwanzu also fights a spillover of the retrogressive patriarchal practices from Kaaka's time such as the use of sex by men to dominate women or to assert their masculine power. This is a fact that is visible when Rex, Genesis' best friend, rapes her on the morning of her wedding. This spillover is also evident in Genesis who cannot stomach the fact that his wife is travelling abroad on a work-related trip. Genesis assumes that this is the beginning of her infidelity and to somehow "tame" her he demands unprotected sex while he understands he is HIV positive. Nkwanzu does not give in on any occasion. With this generational backdrop, it is at this point that we argue that these women give us a representation of the Ugandan nation at various stages and that they offer a span of the imagined Ugandan community of their pains, motives, dreams, and aspirations towards the formation of a nation that is more accommodative of women. When it comes to Ihoreere, the reader can only speculate about what the future holds for her, just like Nkwanzu. It would be far-fetched to argue that Ihoreere would find a softer landing ground in the society. She, just like her grandmother and mother, must learn to fight and assert herself in the face of injustice that is sure to be a part of the new nation.

Conclusion

This article was motivated by the desire to show how Okurut in *The Invisible Weevil* centers women in the fight for a better Uganda while paying attention to the artistic nuances of narration. She seemingly pulls women from the peripheries of a harsh and patriarchal society and brings them to the heart of the agitation for a better nation and for its development. The article was informed by narratology as a theoretical framework and we use textual analysis to bring out the theme of nationalism in the novel. This said, we conclude that Okurut has succeeded in her desire to bring women to the center through her narration of what is happening in the nation of Uganda both in the past and at the present.

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Notes

1. The Buganda kingdom, from which the Kabaka kingdoms descended, was one of the most powerful kingdoms in East Africa during the 19th century, and even before. The kingdom had a "[...] highly organized system of government and well established traditions [...]" (Kiwanuka 21). The governance structure in the Buganda kingdom in the 19th century was unlike any other in the region and this led the early explorers to conclude that "[...] the kingdom must have been founded by a superior race from outside tropical Africa" (21). The Buganda kingdom, apart from being independent and dynamic in the 19th century also boasted of "a long list of ancestors stretching back for nearly five hundred years" (21). It is from this kingdom that Uganda derived its name upon the scramble and partition of Africa by the European colonizers.

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