

Inez Dumaop  
Dr. Mary Warner  
English 112B  
November 4, 2024

## *The Gilded Ones*

By Namina Forna

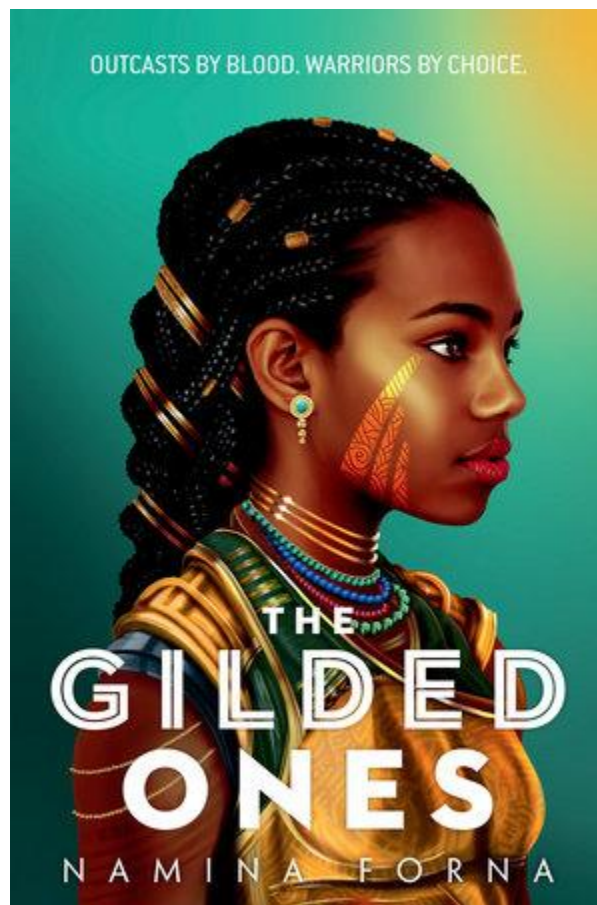


Image source: [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)



Image source: [www.buzzfeednews.com](http://www.buzzfeednews.com)

## About the Author

Namina Forna, originally from Freetown, Sierra Leone in West Africa, holds an MFA in film and TV production from USC and a BA from Spelman College. Forna “didn’t always want to be an author,” but her presence in that space is more than welcome– upon coming to America, Forna realized that Western media lacked faces that looked like her’s, and decided to change that. Namina Forna’s debut novel and series *The Gilded Ones* challenges dominant narratives by writing female heroes and confronting feminist and racial topics. Some of her hobbies include playing with her maltipoo named Niffy and trying out yummy, new restaurants.

Author website: <https://naminaforna.com/home>

## Book Summary

In a village where purity in girls is preserved above all else and the book of “Infinite Wisdoms” is the highest truth of law and order, a young girl named Dekka anticipates the most important moment of her life— the day that she turns sixteen, when the men of the village will decide if she is pure or *unnatural* by the color of her blood. Dekka’s whole life is flipped upside-down when her blood shows gold, the color of impurity. Her kind is called *alaki*, but even to them she is unnatural, as she possesses special powers. When her family and everyone she knows abandons her, she finds that she has only two options— death or survival. Dekka consistently chooses to survive, even when the forces that surround her want nothing more than for her to fail.

## Book Quotes

“No matter what I wear, I’ll never be as pretty as the other girls in the village, with their willowy figures, silken blond hair, and pink cheeks. My own frame is much more sturdy, my skin a deep brown... Mother once told me that girls who look like me are considered pretty in the southern provinces, but she’s the only one who’s ever said that. All everybody else ever sees is how different I look from them. I’ll be lucky if I get a husband from one of the nearby villages, but I have to try. If anything should ever happen to Father, his relatives would find any reason they could to abandon me. A cold sweat washes over me as I think of what would happen then: a life of enforced piety and backbreaking labor as a temple maiden or, worse, being forced into the pleasure houses of the Southern provinces” (10-11).

- There are many layers to this quote as it reveals several aspects of Dekka’s identity and inner dialogue. Dekka acknowledges her physical differences to the other girls in the village, even going so far as not considering herself pretty enough. This inner dialogue is

characteristic for that of a sixteen year old girl, but for Dekka, she deals with another layer of insecurity. Dekka's insecurity comes from the idea that she is different. Her mother comes from the southern provinces so her skin is a deeper color than the people of her father's village where she lives. Dekka not only deals with the teenage self-conscious, but also holds the knowledge that her skin color makes her inherently different and less than those with a light skin complexion. This quote also reveals information about the societal structure, specifically how they treat women. Dekka notes that her "lack" of beauty will be a cause for struggle when finding a husband, showing how women are measured in their beauty. She also worries that if she does not find a husband, she must always rely on her father, but what if her father is gone? Dekka paints these scenarios in her mind where her personhood is always managed by other people, men, and never by herself. Through this quote, it is apparent that Dekka lives in a patriarchal society where women are a commodity to be traded, viewed sometimes as a burden, and treated as property rather than people. Dekka's inner dialogue never goes to what she can control, but rather how these external conditions are controlling her.

"There it is, the condition. Yes, we can flee here, but once we leave Hemaira's gates, we return to our old lives—to the Death Mandate, the constant threat of deathshrieks... Keita is just like all the rest, giving us impossibilities and calling them choices" (84).

- When Dekka was taken in by the strange woman of the nickname White Hands, she is given the choice to either stay in her village, or join the military force of the Emperor to defeat the deathshrieks—the creatures that torture their villages endlessly. In this quote, Dekka is again reminded of this "decision," by her new fighting partner, Keita; stay and fight, or flee and be subject to a life of hateful, discriminatory violence. However, Dekka

knows that nothing can ever be the same again, even if she returns to her “old life.” She is forever branded as an impure, tainted girl who no one will accept, even her family. Dekka comes to the realization that the ideologies imposed on her by the men in charge, such as the priests of her village, the commanders, and now her fighting partner, place women and girls in a position with little to no choices, and absolutely no power. This quote resonates with modern discussions on feminism and deconstructing patriarchal ideologies, particularly with reproductive rights and a woman’s life path, because of the facade of choice. Women are “given” the right to an abortion, but a right to one’s body is not anyone’s right to “give” much less take away. Women are encouraged to be successful and beautiful, but if they succeed too far they are labeled as bad mothers and vain.

“The emperors of Otera have oppressed our kind for too long. Proclaimed us demons. But not their turn has come. 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.” (377).

- In this chapter, Dekka is learning of her true heritage, not the label she was given by the patriarchal empire, but her true identity. Dekka finally receives all of the answers she has been seeking, and it goes beyond what she initially imagined. In this quote, Dekka is being told that all of the oppressive expectations she has experienced growing up and discrimination she has received all her life, is wrong. Throughout the novel, Dekka has picked up on how these conditions have made her feel, and readers witness the harm it

does onto women. It is a powerful moment for Deka to be shown that there is hope for another way of life, and things do not need to be as they are forever.

## Classroom Usage & Why Teens Should Read It

The power of *The Gilded Ones* lies in its ability to reflect the real world within a fantasy realm, specifically topics in feminism, discrimination, and racial identity. The novel does a wonderful job of displaying Deka's perspective and inner dialogue which is the best way for the audience to understand how these external conditions affect her, and therefore girls like her. The novel does not fully delve into the ugliness of these topics, but rather lightly scratches the surface, focusing mostly on the internal, emotional affects in Deka. This makes it a suitable novel for both middle schoolers and high schoolers, as the choice may be left to the teacher for how far the class might want to go in exploring those topics.

SEL (socioemotional learning)

A recurring, broad theme in this novel is difference. Deka is different in many ways; almost all of her identity is an opposition to the "standard," which in this novel is male, light complexion, pious, and pure. If adding this novel into a SEL curriculum, the class might have a discussion surrounding their ideas on difference; what makes them different, what is the standard, and who created it. It can translate into many aspects of a middle and high school experience, such as bullying and loneliness. An art project would nicely accompany this discussion, one called "What Makes You Shine" since Deka's gold blood is what marks her as different, but also special. Students can create an art project of what makes them different and special using gold glitter, gold wrap, and gold paint to signify how although this aspect of their identity makes them different, it also makes them shine.

## World History & Ethnicities

Because this novel is West African inspired, the class can make connections between the domestic, social structures in the novel while exploring the history of Africa. One might explore the author's background, doing research on the factors that forced her family out of Sierra Leone, and connect these ideas to comparable images in the novel. An art project that could accompany this lesson is a map activity where students can draw the different provinces (West, East, South, and North) as they see them in the novel. This would encourage close reading as there are many descriptions of characters from their respective provinces that help characterize these places. After this is done they can connect these descriptions to real world countries.

## English Literature

This novel could be added to a high school literature class's curriculum if positioned at the end of the year when the class moves into contemporary lit. Teaching this novel in a literature class as opposed to the canon, dominant narratives would be beneficial in opening up the literature space to more diverse perspectives. The class would focus on the formal elements of the novel such as first person narrative, archetypes, and descriptive imagery, and show how these elements contribute to the novel's effectiveness in portraying a relatable reader experience. Students could be asked to write an essay or extended journal write focusing on how they connect with the novel, such as how their real world, teenage experiences are similar to Dekka's teenage, supernatural experiences.

### How it Applies to Chapters in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*

Ch. 4- Books about Real-Life Experiences: Making Life Choices, Facing Violence or Abuse, and Living through Family and Relationship Issues

- Dekka is abandoned by her family when they find out she is impure. They send her off to the Temple as part of the “Death Mandate” imposed on Dekka’s kind, the alaki.
- The temple workers kill Dekka over and over again since she is a semi-immortal being, and harvest her gold blood for their selfish needs. This ordeal haunts Dekka’s nightmares and makes her distrust those around her.
- Dekka is told by the oppressive, patriarchal society she lives in that she is an ‘unnatural’ being, and is even isolated by her own kind because of her special abilities. Dekka deals with emotional and physical violence from the social conditions she lives in.

#### Ch. 6- Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions

- Although Dekka and her father live in the Northern provinces, her skin color is that of the Southern provinces. There are instances of the village girls calling her skin “dirty,” showing that they think her skin is impure and less than. There is a clear standard and Dekka does not meet it in the eyes of the Northern provinces.
- The oppressive patriarchal society Dekka lives in discriminates against “impure” women whose blood runs gold. Dekka deals with discrimination from the rest of society from being an alaki, but even her own kind isolates her due to her special abilities.
- Dekka goes through a journey to find more about her powers and how it connects to her mother’s heritage. Because she never felt accepted or fully at home in the Northern provinces, Dekka is determined to find her true home and where she really comes from.

### Text Complexity

#### Quantitative

New Dale-Chall



Score: 44.9

Reading Level: Average

Grade: 6th-8th

Age: 10-11

Old Dale-Chall

Grade: 6th-8th

Ages: 11-13

### Qualitative

Language: Namina Forna's prose is not complicated, but still powerful. Forna cuts straight to the point, while still using beautiful imagery and creating tension within action scenes and moments of emotional turmoil. Deka and her friends are well rounded characters with dynamic development.

Structure: She uses a first-person narrative with a linear, chronological timeline.

Knowledge Demands: As this is the first installment of the trilogy, almost nothing is a need-to-know before reading it. Namina Forna constructs her world within the first couple chapters, and adds depth later on in the novel as well, so readers are able to step into the realm without any prior knowledge. There are some elements that might be helpful in understanding the imagery of the fantastical world, though these items may be researched as one goes along; for example, a student might research a *drakos* when wanting to create an image for Deka's animal companion.

Levels of Meaning: The power of *The Gilded Ones* is found when read within the con-text of contemporary feminist discourse and racial discourse. The novel challenges dominant narratives, Harry Potter for example, by creating a fantasy world with an African-inspired, female hero at the fore.