

Unpacking the Place of Form in Selected Marxist influenced African Works of Art

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Abstract: *This article attempts a socialist realist reading of Time of the Butcherbird, by Alex La Guma, I Will Marry When I Want, by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii and The Honourable MP, by Gonzo Musengezi. Socialist realism is one of the most comprehensive literary criticism theories as it looks at the socio-economic aspect of society which ultimately determines the society’s character, which in turn influences the thinking of the individuals who comprise it, writers included – an influence which is not always for the established order but sometimes an interrogation of it in the form, not only of what is said but also, perhaps more importantly, how it is said or aesthetically packaged in order to have the intended impact on the reader. The latter is the focus of this paper and what is noted is that although the content is crucial in Marxist works as they are meant to be ‘revolutionary’, the form the art is made to assume by its creator contributes significantly to its appreciation by the consumers.*

Key Words: *Form, Content, Marxism, Socialist Realism, African Literature*

Introduction

In this article, an effort will be made to look at some outstanding devices the authors use and assess their relevance to socialist realist art. Marx believed that literature “should reveal a unity of form and content ... but he was suspicious of excessively formalistic writing” (Eagleton, 1986:20).

He maintained that “form is of no value unless it is the form of its content”. (Eagleton, 1986:21) The two quotations show that Marxist writers although skeptical when it comes to excessive formalism, believe that form is useful as a means of putting across the polemics of the writer – the form acting like a conveyor belt of the content.

This article endeavours to look at the socialist realist theoretical principles and how these apply to works by Alex La Guma, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirri and Gonzo H. Musengezi. These are authors who come from different parts of Africa and whose experiences helped shape their world-views since, for Marxists, “social reality is not an indistinct background out of which literature emerges or into which it blends” (Jefferson and Robey (Eds.),1991 :167) but plays a very crucial role in the composition of literary works. All the countries from which the authors in question come from were once colonized and have

not, like any other such country, fully recovered from the ravages of the scourge of colonialism. These are political writers whose works of art:

Strive to represent a reality beyond the merely representational. This is a genre which goes beyond reality towards an anticipation of life and society beyond present reification...the literature of praxis is informed by a belief that 'structure' or 'history', or the 'mechanics of society' provide man with referents which enable him to know himself and the world (Gikandi, 1988: 113).

Such writers maintain that as long as there are classes in society conflict will continue between the marginalized majority and the few exploiters and this class friction has been shown to occur in the societies depicted by the afore-mentioned authors. According to Marx : "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it".(cited in Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker,2005:82) and one way of doing it is through art.

A Brief Theoretical Framework

According to Ngara, socialist art, which is a product of socialist realist writing and which includes the three primary texts under scrutiny here are:

....works which reflect the class structure of society and which present social struggles from the point of view of class and promote the ideals of socialist realism. (Ngara, 1987: 17)

Fischer also concurs with the above assertion when he posits that this form of writing "expresses the thoughts, feelings, moods, points of view and hopes of the new epoch and of its new class". (cited in Ngara, 1987: 17)

This type of literature, as the above quotations show, is literature biased towards the attainment of a socialist society, which is egalitarian in nature. Such works have been influenced primarily by the writings of the philosophers Karl Heinrich Marx and Fredrich Engels. According to these philosophers, all human societies pass through six phases : primitive communalism (characterized by collective ownership of resources), the slave mode of production (characterized by the slaves and slave owners), feudalism (made up of serfs and landlords), capitalism (where there is a class of owners of capital and that of workers who sell their labour to them), and, finally the socialist and communist modes, which are classless. The six epochs outlined above show that society is not static but dynamic. Marxists posit that:

Development in history is not random or chaotic, nor is it a straightforward linear progression, but rather a dialectical development. In every social organization, the prevailing mode of production gives rise to inner contradictions which are expressed in class struggle. (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker,2005:88)

What makes it dynamic are the conflicts that occur between different classes at different stages of history and the resolution of these conflicts.

Ever since Marx and Engels propounded their philosophy there have been many more other approaches based on this which are generally referred to as Marxist Literary Theories or Models. The Reflection Model, which is associated with the Hungarian Geog Lukacs, views literature as “reflecting a reality outside it”. (5) The Production Model is associated with the French Marxist Pierre Machery, who sees literature as productive labour, where raw materials are worked into an end-product. He does not see the author as a creator (a concept which suggests that literary works result from nothing or a vacuum) but as someone who works already existing literary genres, conventions, language and ideology into condensed end-products in the form of literature. In other words, the author is seen as society’s sensory organs combined who sees, hears, feels, touches and tastes, and artistically puts these experiences for society’s consumption. The author only produces his/her book not the raw materials (the experiences) that make it up. The Genetic Model, whose main proponent is Lucien Goldmann, looks at how literature, along with other works of art, come to develop out of social life and what causes literary works to assume the form they do as “genetics” deals with origins and causes. According to Goldmann, literary works arise out of social consciousness and behaviour, and it is the way they are linked to society that he seeks to establish. He asserts that “certain privileged social groups possess a superior form of ideology...a worldview” (Jefferson and Robey (Eds.),1991:184) which they will impose on the weaker members of society as the “right way. Goldmann sees literary works as “collective products of social groups” (Jefferson and Robey (Eds.),1991:188) not an individual’s total creation.

The proponent of the Negative Knowledge Model/Theory, Theodor W. Adorno, asserts that “art is the essence and image of reality rather than its photographic reproduction” (Jefferson and Robey (Eds.),1991:188). A great work in the eyes of Adorno is that which manages to reveal the contradiction between appearance and reality. This suggests that great works should endeavour to counter bourgeois misinformation strategies. The concept “Negative Knowledge” in the sense Adorno uses it is in line with Marxist philosophy, that the economically powerful who control the base of society also control its superstructure (which includes literature) by virtue of their control of the former and for that reason

“teach” people through varied media what to do, how and when, as succinctly put by Selden and Widdowson:

...the relations of exploitation and domination which govern the social and economic order of a particular phase of human history will in some sense ‘determine’ the whole cultural life of the society. (Selden and Widdowson, 1993: 71.)

The writer’s task, according to Adorno, is to raise the ordinary, misinformed or information-starved people’s consciousness – to tell them what they do not know about the causes of their material condition.

The last Marxist approach we will look at is the Language-centred Model developed by the Bakhtin School who see language as the central material medium in which people interact in society, and they see ideology as made of language in the form of linguistic signs. One of the proponents of this school of thought, Voloshnov, argues that “words” are active, dynamic, social signs, capable of taking on different situations.

David Forgacs succinctly describes the relationship between the five Marxist Theories discussed above thus:

Despite their diversity, all Marxist theories of literature have a simple premise in common: that literature can only be properly understood within a larger framework of social reality. Marxists hold that any theory which treats literature in isolation ... divorcing it from society and history, will be deficient in its ability to explain what literature really is... For Marxists, social reality is not an indistinct background out of which literature emerges or into which it blends. It has a definite shape. This shape is found in history which Marxists see as a series of struggles between antagonistic social classes... (Jefferson and Robey (Eds.),1991:167)

Bertens (2001:90) similarly opines thus:

All Marxist critics agree, however, that in the study of literature the social dimension is absolutely indispensable. Writers can never completely escape ideology and their social background so that the social reality of the writer will always be part of the text.

In this article, an integrated approach will be taken in analyzing the three texts because the different Marxist approaches tend to emphasize limited aspects of the “mother” Marxist approach which can be seen as an elephant with the different models looking in detail at its tusks, trunk and so on. Although such, “specializations” are beneficiary in terms of detailed analyses of selected aspects, we feel that a synthesis of the different models is more encompassing and exhaustive.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a renowned African scholar, has this to say about the author in the Preface to *Writers in Politics*:

Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of these social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics.... (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1981:1).

La Guma, another African writer of repute, shares similar sentiments as evidenced by his speech at the African-Scandinavian Writers Conference in 1967 which reads in part:

So when it comes to the position of writers in South Africa, we find that we are in the same position as any ordinary person. The South African artist finds himself with no other choice but to dedicate himself to that movement which must involve, not only himself, but ordinary people as well.... All human activity which does not serve humanity must be a waste of time and effort. (Alex La Guma cited in Cornwell, G. (Ed), October 1991: 36-7).

Like the other authors mentioned earlier, Ngugi and la Guma believe that writers show class tendencies, consciously or unconsciously, as they are not isolated entities but are themselves products of a society which might be stratified. They are, therefore, “writers in politics” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1981:1.) – a notion propounded much earlier by Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels and which comes out loudly in the form the artist chooses his or her work to take.

Analysis of the three works of art

One thing which strikes the reader when appreciating a work of literature is its title which is meant to give, in a nutshell, the concerns of the work. *The Honourable MP* is a title meant to catch the reader’s attention through its ironical representation of the role the supposed Member of Parliament plays in the play. If he is an MP at all, he is one who is in parliament to represent himself not the electorate which put him in power. Alex La Guma’s book’s title *Time of the Butcherbird* is also significant. The title comes

out in the book when the shepherd, Madonele explains to Murile that the butcherbird “.....is a hunter and smeller out of sorcerers, because he impales insects”. (Alex La Guma, 1987: 42) We note that this is not just a mere bird being described but that in the South Africa depicted in the book, the oppressed black people and some “dissident” whites were assuming the role of hunters hunting down sorcerers (the architects and perpetrators of apartheid and economic deprivation). The title *Time of the Butcherbird* seems to imply that the time has come for the formerly oppressed to rise in line with Marxist thinking which states that society is not static but is dynamic due to the ever-present class-conflicts.

The title of Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii’s play is no exception. It suggests a strong yearning for independence. Kiguunda and Wangeci, who are both farm-workers, are told by Ahab Kioi wa Kanora and his wife Jezebel, who are wealthy and powerful, that their customary marriage of many years is a pagan and improper relationship which should be done away with. They are encouraged to have a “proper” but expensive marriage ceremony. To raise the money from the bank they use their small piece of land as collateral security. The reason why the wealthy farmer, businessman and church leader wants this working class couple to have the wedding is that he wants them to sink deep into debt so that he can get their land as he is quite certain that they will fail to repay the bank because of the high interest rates. He also does that because their wedding requirements will be bought from his shop which will mean more money for him. The couple comply and in the process the title deeds for their one-and-half acre plot is taken over by the bank. In its place on the wall is put a board with the inscription ‘Christ is the Head’ (which Kiguunda later destroys after seeing that the whole thing was a plot to dispossesses him of his land). The above incident emphasises the unfortunate relationship between Christianity , Capital and Commerce, at least as depicted by the two playwrights , and also evident in the colonisation of some parts of Africa. By taking control of virtually all facets of life, the working class, represented here by the Kiguunda incident is left with no room to manoeuvre and that is what Kioi who is a capitalist and clergyman at the same time wants and achieves. By making Kiguunda have a bank loan they have hoped to mortgage his and his offspring’s life and property. *I will marry when I want* is a declaration by one who has seen the truth and vows to do what is right not what someone calls right. This incident can be looked at on a macro-level as representing the relations between the Third World and the First World. The former go begging to the latter who give them loans which are difficult to repay: most of the former countries only manage to repay the interest which would have accumulated. As noted by Marx and Friedrich “capitalism reduces all human relationships to a “cash” nexus, self-interest, and egotistical calculation” cited in Habib,2005,209).

Such loans are meant to make the Third World countries perpetual slaves who have to dance to the tune of the powerful. Walter Rodney tells us that:

All the counties named as under-developed in the world are exploited by others; and the underdevelopment with which the world is now imperialist and colonization (Rodney, 1979: 14).

We also find that some names are significant in the three books. An example is Pfende, the name of the Honourable Member of Parliament-“Pfende” is a Shona word which means someone who lacks cleanliness. Pfende is that type of person as he messes up his constituency’s well-being by not representing it in Parliament. He also messes up young girl’s lives by seducing them luring them with his money. An example is Isabella who represents many in her plight who have fallen prey to the African moneyed class. Choto, the teacher, is another symbolic name. Literally it means “fireplace” which normally gives people warmth and is found at a central position where all can get equal access. Likewise Choto has a central role in the revolution as he disseminates ideas and information to the peasants and workers. He represents the intelligentsia in the struggle. In the play *I will marry when I want* those blacks who have become new exploiters often have English first names. Examples are Samuel, Helen and Jezebel to emphasize their separateness from the generality of the people so that they form their own alienated elite class. Most of the names in the same play are typically Kenyan. The authors do this in order to point out that the naked exploitation depicted in the play does not exist outside Kenya but within their midst and by some of them. The same applies to the other two books. In all books a bit of the indigenous language is used : Shona in *The Honourable MP*, Gikuyu in *I Will Marry When I Want* and Afrikaans in *Time of the Butcherbird*. Again this is to give each book its social context and authenticity which are key elements in Marxist literary works which are based on real life experiences or historicity.

Symbolism is used to a very large extent by all authors. Land is one such symbol or image. Kiguunda says:

These one and half acres

These are worth more to me

Than all the thousands that belong to Ahab Kioi (Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirri,1988: 3.)

Kiguunda is unwilling to part with this piece of land which symbolizes not only his individual worth as a human being but also a livelihood of the country’s poor as a whole in similar circumstances. Similarly we find in *Time of the Butcherbird* the Hlangeni people expressing similar sentiments when they are asked to move by white mineral explorers with the blessing of the government : “Here is our land of our ancestors

since those times when they first came. This has been our earth and soil and our home..." (Alex la Guma,1987: 45)

Through highlighting the land question, the authors of the two books show the inhumanity of the capitalist mode of production which is expertly captured in words by Chenjerai Hove in "Uprising" thus:

I have been up in arms
 With this rinsed civilization,
 Civilization that walks naked
 And roasts brother for sister's lunch
 In this civilization,
 Brother by the corner
 Eats till by the corner
 And sister behind the hedge
 Thins like living biltong...(Chenjerai Hove cited in McLoughlin and Mhonyera (Editor):
 1984: 103).

In Edgar Stopes' station-wagon is "a nigger-doll hanging by its neck above the middle of the windscreen". (Alex La Guma, 1987: 42) .This symbolizes the way the blacks are strangled by the oppressive system in the South Africa depicted in the book. In *The Honourable MP* and *Time of the Butcherbird* the drought is not only a climatological phenomenon but something subtle and more serious. In the former book there is, in addition to the physical drought, a drought of representation in parliament which has left the people waiting for the "rain" which does not seem to come soon and in the latter there is a physical as well as a drought of human feeling which has resulted from an insatiable desire for money at the expense of human life. In *I will Marry when I want*, Kiguunda forces Kioi, like many in the class he represents, has lost his humanity. It is, therefore, befitting that Kiguunda subjects him to that treatment.

One very important piece of imagery which Ngugi seems to like very much judging by the frequency with which it occurs in his art is that of the "bean" or "grain". Through Gicaamba, the playwrights say:

A day will come when
 If a bean falls to the ground
 It'll be split equally among us

(Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri,1988: 115)

This image emphasizes the importance of the selflessness and unity in the struggle for a classless society. It can be seen as a hyperbolic statement which is meant to stress the importance of sharing in a future egalitarian society. The same sentiments are echoed by Alex La Guma in *Time of the Butcherbird* when Shilling and Modolene share the little tobacco the former has in a symbolic gesture which is in keeping with Marxist literature.

Language is also used in different “codes” to show class/race relations in the books under scrutiny. Marxists insist that “language is not a self-enclosed system of relations but must be understood as social practice, as deeply rooted in material conditions as any other practice” (Habib,2005:209). There is an interface between language and class.

In *Time of the Butcherbird*, blacks, who form the low class, are referred to as “bliksems”, “dingus”, “darkies” and “kaffirs” which are all derogatory and show the contempt which the haves have for the have-nots, especially now that they seem to be agitated. In *The Honourable MP*, when he is told about the people’s uprising, Pfende says:

How can a foolish, unschooled tribesmen shit in my face like that? And who is this idiot who welcomes a delegation of confused tribesmen into a Minister’s office. Tribesmen with barefoot in a Minister’s office..... (Musengezi, 1990: 4)

The above utterance is used by the author to show that the speaker is from the privileged class, a class which wishes to maintain the status quo which benefits them. In *I will marry when I want*, similar utterances are made. An example is from Kioi who says to Kiguunda:

Just imagine
If all the people are equal like these teeth
Who would do the work? (Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirri,1988: 88)

Kioi’s opposition to socialism/communism, as shown by the speech above, is not surprising bearing in mind that he is from the moneyed class which is the real beneficiary of the peasants’ and workers’ toil.

On the other hand, the oppressed’s language or expression can be identified. We hear Spencer, the maltreated gardener complaining to MP Pfende, his employer, about his illtreatment he suffers at the hands of the MP’s wife thus:

Baas let me talk. I work thirty years here in Highlands for Baas Herbedeen. He live here in Grey Avenue. Thirty years... and no pfutseke .Every week your wife

give off she want. Mrs Herbedeen give pint milk everyday and half bread and you give me nofing for breakfass... Herbedeen, a white man give me all dat ... African oppress African now. This independence – ah ya. Tichatambura stereki. (Musengezi, 1990: 26).

The utterance is characterized by non-standard English to reflect his class and use of code switching and mixing as a scaffold to enhance his communication. Generally the linguistic code used by the oppressed is militant and typically Marxist as it is pro-majority. The following is an example of such expression from Gicaamba in *I will marry when I want*:

Grabbers
Exploiters
Oppressors
Eaters of that which has been produced by others
Their religion
Their prayer
Are all one
Oh, God in heaven
Shut the eyes of the poor
The workers and the peasants
The masses as a whole
Ensure that they never wake up and open their eyes

To see what we really are doing to them: (Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri,1988: 113)

Gicaamba's speech is full of satire, a feature not uncommon in socialist literature as the social order and its oppressive functionaries are caricatured. This can be looked at as what Theodor W. Adorno referred to as "Negative Knowledge" – an attempt to reveal the contradiction between appearance and reality.

In *Time of the Butcherbird*, Mma-Tou, the "she-lion", says: "...men are two kinds, the poor who toil and create the riches of the earth: and the rich who do not toil but devour it..." (Alex La Guma, 1987: 47)

And in *The Honourable MP* the teacher tells the MP that "... it's the people, the masses holding hands with the workers who are fighting people like you...." (Musengezi, 1990: 13)

The three examples given above show that different "linguistic codes" have been used by the different authors to show from which class the speaker comes. The language is not neutral; it reflects the world-

view of the class of origin of the speakers. Overallly linguistic expression especially of the plays, which are meant to be acted and to mobilise those at the lowest wrung of society on their social being and its origin, is not complex. Socialist realist literature is meant to be openly didactic and, because of this, the expression is simple, and images commonplace and based on the historical experiences of the common people.

Summary

This article has endeavoured to show that the literary devices used by the authors Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri in *I will marry when I want*, Gonzo H. Musengezi in *The Honourable MP* and Alex La Guma in *Time of the Butcherbird* are in line with socialist realist writing in highlighting such issues as the transience of historical epochs, class consciousness and conflict or friction between classes. In a nutshell, this article has attempted to show the very close relationship between form and content in works heavily influenced by Marxist thought. The form has been shown to be assuming the status of a vehicle by which the content is artistically conveyed to the reader or audience and that vehicle should be accessible to all and to make sure that it is the idiom used is easy to decode.

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