

POPULARITY OF MARXIST SCHOOL OF THOUGHT IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A CRITIQUE

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Marxism is a theoretical framework of socio-economic analysis that examines class relations and societal conflict using materialistic interpretation of historical development, and a dialectical view of social transformation. Marxist criticism is inspired by the social and economic theories of Karl Marx Fredrick Engels, which originates from the mid-to-late 19th century. The study examines the popularity of Marxist school in African literature via the following objectives:

- **To review Marxist school of thought as a theory**
- **To identify its position in African literature**
- **To investigate Marxist school of thought in African literature.**

The study is a qualitative research and selected African texts deployed to elucidate its data. The first section of the study reviews Marxist school of thought as a literary theory. Effort is made to explore and situate the Marxist theory as integral to African literature. The study concludes that Marxist depicts themes of class struggle, class strata and exploitation, to enlighten and champion socio-political transformation and change.

Keyword: Marxist, social contradiction, criticism, African literature.

1.INTRODUCTION

The history of Marxist has remained central to the study of literature. Literary theory is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles, or tools, by which we attempt to understand literature. All literary interpretations draw on a basis in theory but can serve as a justification for very

different kinds of critical activity. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between an author and his work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of their thematic concepts within texts. Lastly, literary theory in recent years has sought to explain the degree to which the text is more the product of a culture than an individual author and how those texts help to create the culture (Brewton 2017).

Marxist criticism is a type of literary criticism and it is based on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Their beliefs include the following: value is based on labour; and the working class will eventually overthrow the capitalist middle class. In the meantime, the middle class exploits the working class. Most institutions - religious, legal, educational and governmental are corrupted by middle-class capitalists. Marxist critics apply these economic and social theories to literature by analysing first, ideologies that support the elite and place the working class at a disadvantage, and issues of class conflict. Marxist criticism is often interested in exposing and examining how a literary work reflects (intentionally or not) the socio-economic conditions of the era or time in which it was written and, or the time which it is set, and what those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?

According to Griffith (2002), Marxist criticism appeared early in the 20th century, especially in the 1930s during the Great Depression. This "socialist" criticism applauded literature that depicted the difficulties of the poor and down trodden, especially when they struggled against oppressive capitalist

bosses. Examples of literature with such strong "proletarian elements are works by Emile Zola, Maxim Gorky, Charles Dickens, Richard Wright, John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Femi Osofisan. Early Marxist critics approved of a socialist solution to the problems of the oppressed and judged the quality of works on the basis of their Marxist orientation.

The strong "proletarian" elements in the works of African writers like Ngugi assume/combatative dimensions in the late, 1970s and 1980s with street theatre enactments of Marxist-oriented plays that shook the nation-state earning him the tag of "literary guerilla of the masses" in his country, Kenya. Dysphagia or difficulty in swallowing is common among all age groups. Dysphagia is common in about 35% of the general population, well as an additional 30–40% of elderly institutionalized patients and 18–22% of all persons in long-term care facilities. Common complaints about the difficulty in swallowing tablets in the order of frequency of complaints are size, surface, form, and taste of tablets. Geriatric and paediatric patients and travelling patients who may not have ready access to water are most in need of easy swallowing dosage forms. During the last decade, fast disintegrating tablet (FDT) technologies that make tablets disintegrate in the mouth without chewing and additional water intake have drawn a great deal of attention. The FDT is also known as fast melting, fast dispersing, rapid dissolve, rapid melt, and quick disintegrating tablet. All FDTs approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are classified as orally disintegrating tablets. Recently, the European Pharmacopoeia adopted the term orodispersible tablet for a tablet that disperses or disintegrates in less than 3 minutes in the mouth before swallowing. Such a tablet disintegrates into smaller granules or melts in the mouth from a hard solid to a gel-like structure, allowing easy swallowing by patients. The disintegration time for good FDTs varies from several seconds to about a minute [9,10].

2. MARXIST SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Marxist literary criticism is based on social and dialectic theory. It portrays literary work as reflections of social institutions from which they originate. According to Marxists, even literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function based on the background and ideology of the author Ducker and Spielvogel (2008).

Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class and its prevailing 'ideology' (outlook, values, tacit assumptions, half-realised allegiance, etc.) have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So, instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous "inspired" individuals whose "genius" and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways, which they themselves would usually not admit. This is true not just of the content of their work but even of formal aspects of their writing, which might at first seem to have no possible political overtones. For instance, the prominent British Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton suggests that in language "shared definitions and regularities of grammar both reflect and help constitute, a well-ordered political state" (Shakespeare 1986 notes in Barry 2002).

Similarly, Catherine Belsey, another prominent British left-wing critic, argues that the form of the "realist" novel contains implicit validation of the existing social structure. This is because realism, leaves conventional ways of seeing intact, and hence tends to discourage critical scrutiny of reality. By "form" here is included all the conventional features of the novel chronological time-schemes, formal beginnings and endings, in-depth psychological characterisation, intricate plotting, and fixed narratorial points of view.

Also, the 'fragmented', "absurdist" forms of drama and fiction used by twentieth-century writers like Beckett and Kafka are seen as a response to the contradictions and divisions inherent in late capitalist society. However, it is probably true to say (Newton

1992 notes in Barry 2002) that traditional Marxist criticism tends to deal with history in a fairly generalised way. It talks about conflicts between social classes, and clashes of large historical forces, but, contrary to popular belief, it rarely discusses the details of a specific historical situation and relates it closely to the interpretation of a particular literary text.

Literature does not only reflect the ideology of a society but also its superstructure, economic base and social relations. For example, judiciary, executive, legislature, the military and religious institutions. They are concerned with the way "the national cake" is produced and equitably shared by the rulers, capitalists, industrialist's elite workers and peasants. These groups are social classes Adetuyi and Adeniran (2017). Writers need to reflect their social class leaning in what they write. An important question to ask yourself as a writer is who am I writing for? Am I merely paying lip service to the powers that be, or am I championing the interests of the voiceless, disadvantaged masses? For Marxists, a good writer is the one who does the latter (Samwiterson, 2011). The writers should explicate the fact that Marxism generally focuses on the clash between the dominant and repressed classes in any given age and, he should devise his art to imitate what is often termed an "objective" reality where superstructure refers to the social political and ideological systems and institutions. For example, values, art, and legal processes of a society that are generated by the base.

2.1 What Marxist Critics Do

According to Barry (2002):

- They make a division between the "overt" (manifest or surface) and "covert" (latent or hidden) content of a literary work (much as psychoanalytic critics do) and then relate the covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, or the progression of society through various historical stages such as, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Thus, the conflicts in King Lear

might be read as being "really" about the conflicts of class interest between the rising class (the bourgeoisie) and the falling class (the feudal overlords).

- A Marxist critic is relating the context of a work to the social class status of the author. In such cases an assumption is made (which again is similar to those made by psycho analytic critics) that the author is unaware of what he or is revealing in the text.
- A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which "produced" it. For instance, *The Rise of the Novel*, by Ian Watt, relates the growth of the novel in the eighteenth century to the expansion of the middle classes during that period. The novel 'speaks' for this social class, just as, for instance, *Tragedy* "speaks for" the monarchy and the nobility, and the *Ballad* 'speaks for' the rural and semi-urban "working class".
- A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is "consumed"; a strategy which is used (particular) in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism.
- A fifth Marxist practice is the "politicisation" of literary form, that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance. For instance, in the view of some critics, literary realism carries with it an implicit validation of conservative social structures: for others, the formal and metrical intricacies of the sonnet and the iambic pentameter are a counterpart of social stability, decorum, and order.

3. POPULARITY OF MARXIST SCHOOL OF THOUGHT IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Africa, Marxist school of thought was effectively utilized and depicted by writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and O. P'Bitek in East Africa, Alex la Guma in South Africa, Wole Soyinka, Sembene Ousmane, and

Christopher Okigbo in West Africa and Jack Mapanje in Central Africa (Mushengezi, 2003). These were influenced by socialist and Marxist theory and their writings reflect this.

Marxists view the writing and study of literature essentially as an activity with socio-political consequences. The goal of a writer should be to heighten people's feelings and desires to rise up and demand for radical change (Mushengezi, 2003:82). Literature therefore becomes a tool for socio-political transformation, it should be mimetic, that is, it should mirror the real situation in the society and cause change where change is due. In particular a writer should be a voice of change for those who are disadvantaged or oppressed. Writers like Ngugi, Sembene, and Ayi Kwei Armah reflect this ideology.

Ngugi's commitment to activism for instance in his novel *Devil on the Cross*, *Petals of blood* and *Matigari* is a case in point. He calls upon the Kenya masses to rise in a popular revolution and fight for their land and their rights (Mushengezi, 2003:82). In Sembene's "God's Bits of Wood", he presents a massive strike of railway workers demanding for their rights, better pay and improved working conditions. This for Marxist critics should be the role of literature; to cause change where change is due.

Marxist critics determinedly historicize the study of literature unlike Russian Formalists and new critics. Their argument is that, history is the horizon within which literature should be written and understood. According to them/a novel, poem or play can only be best analyzed if the experiences of the people their political and economic relations and their social systems are all examined from a historical perspective. The writer has to recast the historical record in an artistic way. That is why writers like Ngugi always begin from the history of their people as a starting point. The Marxist point of view is that history illuminates the present and forecasts the future (Mushengezi: 83). Marxism is also a sociological approach to literature that perceives works of literature or art as the products

of historical forces that can be analysed by looking at the material conditions in which they were formed. In Marxist ideology what we often classify as world view (such as Victorian age) is actually the articulations of the dominant class.

In real time, Marxist theory has been very objective in literary criticism and the study of African literature. Many African writers who embraced this theory in their works have awakened the oppressed masses to demand their rights. Its influence was felt during colonialism when most writers wrote condemning the evils of colonialism and its oppressive tendencies. The influence has continued to post independent Africa as the corrupt African regimes have continued to exercise the same evils as those the colonialists overran/oppressed over Africans. To see the objectivity of this approach, will suffice the following cases, and some readings reflecting Marxism.

Literature as a tool for social transformation; (according to Marxist theory), should aim at changing some of the outdated social convictions that we practiced in most societies. It should aim at transforming the culture, norms, beliefs, and values that are evil, and suggest the new ones. The role of literature therefore should be to awaken the people to demand changes where change is necessary and should expose the wrongs in the society. The writer should act as the voice of change for the oppressed. Ama Ata Aidoo, does this well in *Dilemma of the Ghost*, when she criticizes one of the outdated culture of choosing spouses for young men. The author shows how Ato Yawson struggles to change that culture. Ato comes from America with an Afro-American spouse, who is strongly rejected by his family. However he struggles to show them the importance of discarding that outdated culture, in page 16-20 the whole incident is discussed. Refer the conversation between Ato and his people on the matter.

Akyere: If so, what is her tribe?

Ato: She has no tribe, she does not come. .

Nana: *She has no tribe? The story you are telling us is too sweet, my grandson. Since I was born I have not heard of a human being who has no tribe. Are there trees which never have roots?*

According to Marxism, a literary work author should be the mirror of the society. Since the author is the product of the society and does not come from a vacuum, it should reflect in what he/she writes. In other words he/she should write what actually is in his/her own society. The author exposes the evils in his/her society, but unlike the mirror he/she may also suggest the better alternatives or leave it to the society to decide. The clashes that always prevail between the politically and economically powerful classes like; the ruling class, capitalists, industrialists, against the proletariat class of peasants and workers. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o being one of the prominent supporters of Marxism ideology, champions the interests of the poor Kenyans who were deprived of their land and consequently work for the capitalists. In his *I Will Marry When I Want* page 3, he says:

The power of our hand goes to feed three people.

Imperialists from Europe,

Imperialists from America,

Imperialists from Japan,

And of course their local watchmen.

The labor of our hand is the real wealth of the country

Marxists believe that the writer influences people's feelings and desire to change. Marxists portrayed, opined that there are "always social-political and economic classes in any society, and the classes are always in conflict on how the 'national cake' is produced and equitably shared among the capitalists, rulers, industrialists, elite and peasants and workers. The writer should express these conflicts and

particularly should challenge the ideology of the superstructure, in order to promote the interest of the workers and peasants-the oppressed and exploited masses. For example Ngugi in *I Will Marry When I Want* shows how the poor can rise to demand for their rights when even the legal justice organs have failed to stand for their rights. In page 101 he writes:

"...Don 't you know how it pains?

When I truly know that

It's your son who hired her away from home?

Now I'll prove to you that

I am a human being.

This sword is my law and my court.

Poor people's law court."

Marxists propose that the writer should not propagate the dominant ideology for its own sake but rather he/she should challenge certain ideologies that are considered dangerous and misleading to the society (Mushengezi, 2003). Eagleton (1976) notes in Samwiteron(2011) considers ideology as the socially constructed ideas, image, values and norms that bind us to particular social roles which underpin our relations as individuals, sexes or social classes. A good writer should awaken the people not to follow certain ideologies blindly and without questioning. But rather they should question what they do and why they do it. When the people have the opportunity to question their social practices they open doors for changes, and this should be the role of the Marxist writer.

Marxists also believe that history is the horizon within which literature should be written and understood. Literature cannot exist independent of history of the people the writer is writing about. Mushengezi (2003) puts it this way;

"a novel, poem or play can only be best analyzed

if the experience of the people, their political and economic relations and their social systems are all examined- "

That's why writers like Ngugi, always in most of his works depicts the history of Kenyans as a starting point. In his play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* he depicts the history of Dedan Kimathi who is a real and not a fictional character. But the way he is developed in the text makes him more of a literary character than a historical figure. Dedan Kimathi (also known as Kimathi waWaciuri) was an important member of Kenya's militant Nationalist group, The Mau Mau. In 1956 Kimathi was captured with Wainbui his "forest wife" and sentenced to death. He was hanged on February 18, 1957 at Nairobi Prison and was buried in a mass grave Adetuyi (2017). The Marxist argument is that history illuminates the past and forecasts the future. The author according to Marxism should be an activist. As an activist the author has the role of standing for the rights of people's and demand changes where change is pertinent. The writer should be the voice of the disadvantaged ones. The writer should totally immerse himself/herself in championing the interests of the poor. As Mushengezi (2003) puts it in the following paragraph Ngugi's commitment to activism is no doubt total. According to Marxist critics, this should be the role of literature: to influence/instigate change. In *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* for example, Ngugi shows how people can wage a struggle to recover their land and lost rights. Here a woman talks to a Boy on what can be done. Page 21

WOMAN: *Your words contain wisdom, son. Kimathi was never alone... will never be alone. No bullet can kill him for as long as women continue to bear children. Let a thousand bullets be shot through our heads, but this I believe: one day, the soil will be restored to the people. Our land shall one day be truly ours...*

The popularity of Marxism to African literature in particular and world literature in general is contained in its origin from political economy. Man is viewed by a Marxist as a social, economic and political being. Since the African novel has essentially evolved out of the writer's mandate to reflect socio-political and economic experiences, the postulates of Marxism may assist in its interpretation. Eagleton illuminates this with his explanation:

"... Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis

which aims to understand ideologies the ideas, the values and feelings

by which men experiences! the society at various times. And certain of those

ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature.

(Eagleton 1996 notes in Afolayan 2011).

From this explanation, we can deduce that Marxism is not primarily designed for literature. As Eagleton has identified, it is a body of theoretical foundation that further explicates the complex nature and formation of men in society. In sum, therefore, as Forgas suggests, Marxist theorists do not constitute a school like the Moscow and Petersburg exponents of formalism, the Prague structuralists or the Tel Quel theorists in Paris..... "Marxism is a living body of thought and a set of real political practices."(Jefferson and Robey 1985 note in Afolayan 2011). Marxist criticism operates on the assumption that literature can be properly understood only within a larger framework of social reality. Since the African novelist is given to the portrayal of social reality, which evinces the realistic sociopolitical situations of the Third World. Marxism has much to offer the modern African novel.

4. CONCLUSION

Marxist criticism is a term for a number of critical approaches to literature that focus on social and economic theories of Karl Marx. Marx maintained that material production or economics ultimately determines the course of history, and influences social structures. Marx argued that a writer should not be held in place by the dominant ideology, which serves to reinforce the interest of the ruling class. Marxist criticism approaches a struggle with social realities and ideologies. Marxists see literature as 'a reflection of the material reality under which we live.' The writer's primary responsibility is to channel his/her creative energy towards the production of the aesthetic devoted to the fight for freedom, exposing the distorted values integral to capitalist exploitative system and the struggle against exploitation in a class society. To this end, writer has to be sensitive to the class nature of the society and its influence on the imagination. Literature is part of the class power structures that shape-but everyday life. A writer's works invariably reflects the various struggles political, cultural, ideological and economic activities on in the society. Every literature is a commitment to a particular political ideology and even writer is a writer in politics. For literature to be meaningful, it has to assume a revolutionary stance. Its focus must be on a critical appraisal of the economic structure of modern society, which is essential to starting a revolution. Truly, literature is technological its goal must be to transform a given society.

Therefore, the essential task of literature, for the African writer, is to act as a vehicle of liberation from European imperialistic capitalism, which has placed the West at the core and Africa and the third world at the periphery economic and social relations. It is only a revolution that can restore to Africa and its people the self-image and confidence necessary for the radical transformation of society. Literature cannot stand apart from the social processes taking place in the society. Literature cannot stand apart from the social processes taking place in the society. For this, the African writer must shun 'abstract notions of justice and peace' and actively support the 'actual struggle of the African peoples' and in his writing reflect 'the struggle of the African working class and its peasant class allies for the total liberation of their labour power. This alone can

provide the foundation for a social transformation of the society.

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