

Revisiting Critiques of Socialist Realism in Selected African Novels

By

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Abstract

This work examines prevailing critiques of socialist realism in selected African novels using Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Iyayi's *Violence, The Contract and Heroes*. The underlying fact in the choice of these literary works is premised on the struggle for power and political relevance as reflected in these selected works. The works show that the doctrine of socialist realism suggests that change in society is historically necessary and inevitable. Also, realists agree that those problems can be overcome only by the liquidation of the capitalist state, hence, it does not at all subscribe to reformism; rather it opts for a revolutionary change in society

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Introduction

Socialist Realism: An Overview

Socialist realism is a form of realist art and literature dated to the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the 1930s. The socialist realism movement became significant at the end of World War II. It is associated with the communist approach which is rooted in the belief of a classless society of abundance and freedom in which all people enjoy equal social and economic status. It is widely held that communism is an offshoot of socialist realism. In modern form, communism grew out of the socialist movement of 19th century Europe. The approach of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels adopted a 'scientific socialism' in order to see socialism as merely an intermediate stage of society in which most industry and property are owned in common but some class differences remained. Socialist realism is a style of art, fiction, movies and plays which describes the daily life of workers and

poor people. The weakness of the Socialist Realist movement—its attempt to impose a political pattern on creative writing, its denial of themes arising from contemporary conflicts—resulted partly from the stranglehold of the Stalinist regime.

Socialist Realism in Literature

The doctrine of socialist realm as a descent and integral part of Marxism no doubt sees change in society as historically necessary and inevitable where major class conflicts exist. The modus operandi therefore will be for the working class to put up a collective and fierce fight against the bourgeois class in consonance with Karl Marx and Frederick Engels assertion in the Manifesto of the Communist Party (1888) that:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Freeman and slave, Patrician and Plebeian, Lord and Serf, guild-master and journey man in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of the society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (35-36).

There were the patricians, plebeians and slaves in the former, and feudal Lords, vassals, guild-master, journeyman, apprentices and serfs, in the latter. Hence, the modern state is taking after the Feudal society, as it does not attempt to do away with the class conflict. Instead, it has intensified the rifts and cleavages by introducing new methods and conditions of oppression, in place of the old types. Thus Marx and Engels say that: ‘Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other’ (36).

Marx and Engel’s assertion becomes clear and convincing when one looks critically at the present class structures in emergent African nations like Nigeria, Kenya, Senegal, etc. The eighty percent (80%) who live below the breadline standard wallow in penury with little or no hope of a better tomorrow under the existing system but the rich who are in the minority have more than enough to eat.

The society is stratified into opposed class groups which are in mutual distrust of each other. This is what the socialist realist artist who is bent on exposing and, in fact, presenting the working class struggle. A Nigerian critic, Omafume Onoge (1978) elaborates

that:

The socialist realist artist or intellectual for matter – shows the world as changeable. And because of his historical materialist outlook, his prospective vision is a positive statement on behalf of the revolutionary aspirations of the exploited class (125).

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* shows the workers led by the militant trade union leader, Karega, clamouring for higher pay. This action goes to buttress the argument that socialist realist writers have an unflinching trust in the peasantry and the working class. The socialist realist artist is also concerned with the nature of capitalist relations and looks at them in historical perspective. This is exemplified in Sembene Ousmane's *Gods Bits of Wood* where the author fictionalises the railway workers strike of October 1947 – March 1948, along the Niger – Darkar railway line and celebrates the victory of ordinary railway workers.

Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* exposes the political life which seems to be the vicious circus of degeneration with little hope of regenerative capacity in Nigeria of the first Republic. It is the society in which the centre does not hold and things fall apart (to borrow the title of another of Achebe's novel). The learned youths who feel embittered at the turnout of events in their country connive to form a party for the commoners and lay people in order to fight the existing party.

Socialist realism advocates the necessity for collective action and enterprise while the role of the individual, as a leader, is demystified. Socialist realist artist names the existing reality capitalism – from which other ills in society like bribery, violence, poverty, rigging of election, thuggery, nepotism emanate. A socialist realist perspective accepts that these obstacles to progress can be overcome only by the dissolution of the capitalist state. Socialist realism introduces a new element, the ability to seize upon life in its revolutionary movement and to form the minds of the readers and spectators, that is, in the spirit of socialism.

Socialist Realism in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* seems to ask what independence on which people have reposed so much confidence has brought for them. For him, the independence movement has been betrayed. The hopes of the peasants and workers for whom the war was fought have been shattered. They have been further

alienated from the land – the source of life and vitality. The land has been stolen and converted for the promotion of big capitalist business, by an emergent Kenyan entrepreneurial middle class, in collaboration with international finance capitalists. Ngugi seems to side with the peasants and workers who are constantly oppressed and betrayed by the bourgeois class in Kenya, Africa at large. The bourgeois class is the class of Africans or people that exploit the masses, in collaboration with foreign capitalists or firms. Killam quotes Ngugi at confirming that:

All writers can do is to really try to point out where things are wrong, says Ngugi. But fiction should be firmly on the side of the oppressed. Fiction should firmly embody the aspirations and hopes of the majority – of the peasants and workers (97).

This is what *Petals of Blood* exposes in epic proportions. Thus, the novel, typical of its socialist realist outlook, plays down on individual leadership. The novel has characters that represent all facets of a social community. While the three African directors clearly represent the ruling class in neocolonial Kenya, we have Abdulla, Karega and Wanja as the representative of the Kenya peasantry. Munira, who is an ambivalent and a vacillating character represents the confused Kenyan who is wavering.

At the beginning of the novel, these four major characters who met by chance in Ilmorog are suspected of murdering the former mentioned African directors of the Theng'eta Breweries in Ilmorog. I suppose what prompted the murder of the three men is the cause of the unfolding lot of the novel. The different motivations for the murder are: as a result of their nefarious activities in the past and present to the detriment of Wanja and Karega and in order to eliminate this petty-bourgeois class.

Godfrey Munira is the son of a rich and successful entrepreneur – Ezekiel Waweru, who made his money by collaboration with white settlers and the sale of land left by the settlers. Munira stands out in an aggressively successful family as a mere schoolteacher. Hence, according to the novel:

It pained Munira that he still depended on his father or a place in which to set a home. He has always thought of striking out on his own, but he had remained circling around his father's property without at the same time being fully part of it. This was unlike the more successful brothers (13).

Munira is important in terms of the political insights offered in the novel. He represents the confused Kenyan who is unsure of his position, whether to be a committed Kenyan or follow his father's footsteps. This conforms to Marxist scholars' assertion that the petty-bourgeois are the most unreliable class in political terms. Hence, Munira is of political ambivalence because throughout the novel, he is undecided even to choose between aligning with the petty-bourgeoisie or to identify with the peasants. He later clings to evangelism which is presented in the novel as a form of escapism but this does not seem to be a solution as envisaged by the author.

Abdulla, another major character came to Ilmorog to escape from the disillusionment in neocolonial Kenya. As an ex Mau-mau guerilla fighter and nationalist, he lost a leg which is testimony to a betrayed generation of honourable men who forsook the comforts of home and braved hardship of the forest in order to rescue their homeland from shameful oppression. But the rewards of independence and its blessing do not come his way, and he blames it on the capitalist existence in his society as he wonders in the novel:

...how was it that a boss who never once lifted a load, who never once dirtied himself could still live in a big house and own a car and employ a driver and more than four people only to cut grass in the compound? (136).

He consoles himself by possessing a donkey and a cart, referring to the donkey as his other leg. He becomes a rallying force in the trek to the city, sustaining others by sheer resourcefulness in spite of his disability. And his crippled leg is a manifestation of the grotesque realities of the post-independence era. Thus Ngugi presents him as a gallant figure who links in his private history the heroic past of the Mau-mau uprising against imperialism, and the inglorious present which he nevertheless leads us to feel is just beneath the surface, alive with positive human potentials.

Wanga, the female character struggles against the cruel forces in neocolonial Kenya. She is a typical character and a girl from a poor rural background, who cannot make it through education due to her predicament of pregnancy as a girl thus the problem of sexual oppression is elaborated through her as she is seduced by Kimeria, who later abandons her to suffer. Her adaptable and buoyant nature saves her and she survives to repay those who have abused her as an instrument of retribution, which is later culminated by fire.

Karega typifies the landless peasantry in neocolonial Kenya, and represents an important but disposed section of Kenyans who are economically and socially insecure. This is shown as Karega's mother was a squatter on Munira's father's land. Astonished by the capitalism and materialism Karega finds around him with their attendant problems, he opts for a proper and equitable reorganisation of their society. He becomes obviously a mouthpiece for Ngugi to put across his socialist message, he becomes a militant agitator relentlessly mobilising the workers and peasants for a new and democratic world to be realised.

Karega is Ngugi's prototype of the oppressed poor, who learns to resist their oppression and envisages the reconstruction of society. He is therefore, the authentic revolutionary figure, making fertile the dormant soil. One who points the way to the possibility of a better future. The one who leads the other key characters to rouse Ilmorog from lethargy of despair, invoking the collective will, the spirit of solidarity and a common destiny by which the tribe sustained itself in past ages. So the village undertakes the great journey to the town to seek deliverance from natural disaster and human neglect. Ironically, the journey is the ultimate cause of the annihilation of old Ilmorog, for the new Ilmorog which rises in its place is the complete negation of everything the old village has stood for, a transformation for which the petitioners had not bargained.

Clearly for Ngugi, small successes by lowly members of society in their perpetual conflict with those who seek to over master them are of immense significance. He builds such incidents carefully into the text and celebrates them. There is no reason to doubt that he has been influenced by the socialist realism doctrine of the historical inevitability of the ultimate triumph of those who have traditionally been oppressed, and through it expresses an optimistic faith in a future egalitarian social order. Hence, beyond the pillorying of human wickedness and the tragedy of human debasement, the novel asserts a great hope that the mass of humanity will in time prevail over the malignity of the privileged few. Shama in 'Ngugi's *Apocalypse*' asserts that '*Petal of Blood*' is Marxist in its portrayal of alienation and of socioeconomic factors which contribute to this alienation (313). Therefore, Ngugi adopted this ideology socialist realism explicitly in his novel *Petal of Blood*.

Socialist Realism in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

The prominent Nigerian writer in his novel, *A Man of the People*, explores to a reasonable extent the adoption of socialist realism. He relates from the viewpoint of an Igbo graduate Odili Samalu, the satire of corruption and power struggles in an African State in the 1960s. The central characters are the ruling class as represented by the Minister of Culture, Chief M.A. Nanga and his mates like Chief Koko as opposed to the vibrant, ambitious but neglected professionals like the narrator and teacher Odili Samalu, his lawyer friend Maxwell Kulamo, Eunice (Max's fiancée) and other intellectuals who have the intention of drawing the workers and the so-called peasants into their party called the Common People's Convention (CPC). Hence, according to the novel, when Odili enquires why their party should be made of professional men and women, Max replies:

That is not entirely accurate, Odili. What you see here is only the vanguard, the planning stage. Once we are ready, we shall draw in the workers, the farmer, the blacksmith, the carpenter ... (88).

The young lady lawyer and fiancée to Max continues thus:

...And the unemployed of course ... the great revolutions of history were started by intellectuals, not the common people, Karl Marx was not a common man; he wasn't even a Russian. (88-89).

The above calls to mind, therefore, that the writer has his bedrock ideology as socialist realism which emphasises the literature which is inextricably linked with the working class movement. Although Odili stands against the government because of his personal interest – revenge – as a result of Chief Nanga's sleeping with his girlfriend, more than as a result of ideological reason, but the friend and founder of CPC – Maxwell Kulamo – has an inept reason to create a new party for the poor in opposition to the ruling party. His intention is modest and typical of socialist realism. He refers to Nanga as a capitalist when he learns from Odili that he was staying with him, during his complain over telephone installation delay. He says:

I have been on the waiting list for a telephone for two months, you see, I have not given anyone a bribe and I don't know any big gun ... so you have been staying with that corrupt, empty-headed illiterate capitalist, sorry – o (83).

Although there is no physical combat that ensued between the ruling class and the lower class representative parties, the mere challenge the new party poised to the ruling class brought confusion in the midst of the ruling class. Hence, Chief Nanga finds it so uncomfortable competing with Odili from his own town and he damns the shame, sums up courage and approaches him in his own home, mindless of the insult Odili gives him, and at Odili's father's chagrin, Chief Nanga calms him: 'Don't worry about Odili sir. If a young man does not behave like a young man, who is going to?'

He eventually offers him two hundred and fifty pounds for him to step down and also a scholarship to study abroad. Odili turns down the offer and persists in his struggle to overthrow the corrupt politician despite the fact that he nurtures his failure at the back of his mind, he is not deterred. That is a socialist spirit – to persist in the struggle whether or not there is chance for success. Every effort made towards overthrowing capitalism is worth the strength.

Chief the honourable M.A. Nanga personifies the sharing of the national cake – the philosophy of consumerism. Despite the struggle to overthrow the P.O.P without success, the C.P.C does not relent as, in the end, Odili is beaten up by the party thugs, Maxwell Kulamo dies as a sacrificial lamb for the ignoble political system. But the victory that comes, though a sour one, still indicates an emergence of a new nation. Thus Chief S.I. Koko is killed by Eunice (Max's fiancée) after Max is knocked down by one of Chief Koko's jeeps. Chief Nanga is arrested while intending to run away disguised as a fisherman; the army takes over the government. The impact of the commoner's party brought the downfall of the giants.

Socialist Realism in Iyayi's Works

Another Nigerian-born writer, Festus Iyayi, in his three novels, *Violence*, *The Contract* and *Heroes*, as well as his collection of short stories *Awaiting Court Marital*, exposes the abject penury and disenfranchisement that constitute the social reality of the majority of Nigerians. In language that is often vitriolic and stinging, Iyayi's protagonists potently display his contempt for the rampant corruption that straggles contemporary Nigeria. Business persons, politicians, generals and other officials hoard the

country's wealth and power at the expense of the working class. This base depravity of the ruling class manifests itself in various forms and ultimately trickles down to the ruled class. In each of Iyayi's novels, the real tragedy is that those of the ruled class are either forced or coerced to absorb their oppressor's abuse. They in turn release their anger and frustration not upon the deserving ruling class, but amongst themselves. Iyayi, however, does weave threads of hope within each of his narratives via truculent calls by the main characters to defy their oppressor's en masse and fight for their civil rights as well as for the future of their country. Also driving Iyayi's political critique is a profound acceptance of humanity's fragility and frailty. Especially in *Awaiting Court Martial*, Iyayi displays an uncanny ability for capturing the details of his character's troubled psyches through crisp metaphors and often-naturalistic imagery.

'Violence' usually connotes physical abuse, but in his first novel, *Violence*, Iyayi redefines it as a continual, demoralising structure that eliminates hope, pride, self-esteem, health and the ability to live independently. Having to always rely on borrowed Naira from those who are more fortunate leaves deep scars of shame and guilt. Iyayi's *Violence* creeps into the corners of the pneuma of the lower classes, the have-nots and renders them helpless against the socio-political machine powered solely by money, corruption and privilege.

Obofun and Queen exemplify Nigeria's corrupt, monied class. Obofun makes his millions by winning coveted building contracts through his connections in the government and through the relinquishing of percentages of the contracts' total worth to those who award them. His wife, Queen, sleeps with other men to get what she wants – namely: supplies, which are otherwise expensive and scarce for her hotels. When Idemudia, a typical, destitute labourer is fortunate enough to find work, the conditions at the site are deplorable. If he wants to keep his job and be able to feed himself and his wife, Adisa, then he has to swallow the maltreatment. If he chooses to fight the system, to organise the workers against his boss, Queen, and to ask for higher wages and better conditions, then he risks being fired and subsequent starvation.

One of the most effective passages in *Violence* is a series of lines from a play performed at a local hospital. Iyayi utilises this

poignant and very effective device to convey his definition of violence. Idemudia witnesses this play, is educated and inspired by the actor who denounces violence and advocates resistance, and then leads his co-workers in threatening to strike for better wages and conditions.

Iyayi's writing continues to be mordacious and gripping in his second novel, *The Contract*. The main character, Ogie, returns to Benin after an absence of four years and is amazed and disgusted at how quickly and completely the city has decayed. There is filth and chaos everywhere. He learns that the government awards contracts for building hospital, roads, and low-cost housing, then demands percentages for awarding the contract. This practice leaves little or no money for building the structures the contract was for resulting in inferior and often abandoned projects. The people of Benin live in squalor while a few wealthy, corrupt officials get fatter. Anything can be bought or sold. Men will even offer their wives for a favoured change at winning a contract, or lie, cheat and even kill for fortunes. Like Idemudia in *Violence*, Ogie's abomination of the stark contrasts of wealth and poverty in his hometown is potently conveyed. He swears he will fight the system of which even his father is a part. He takes a job at the council and soon finds himself tortuously torn and confused over right and wrong. He continues to reaffirm decent convictions but eventually compromises his values to become 'corruption with a human face.' He decides he cannot beat the system entirely, but can take the money he receives from the contract percentages and invest it in Benin and local businesses, rather than hoard it in a Swiss bank account.

Heroes, Iyayi's third novel is set against the background of Nigeria's Civil War in the late 1960s. As in his previous work, Iyayi's style is forceful and bold. Once again, he cries out against the injustice in Nigeria through well-crafted characters and electrifying writing.

Osime is a journalist who supports the vociferous calls for a united Nigeria and those denouncing the Biafran soldiers and exalting the Federal troops. He sees the Federal troops as the saving force for Nigeria. But when the Federal troops shoot and kill his girlfriend's father without cause in cold blood, he begins to realise that there is more to the war than he had originally thought. Osime quickly sees that even though the Biafran and Federal troops commit wretched

crimes, the generals and the officers are the real enemies of the people of Nigeria. The soldiers have learned to become murderers from the military officers. They are merely instruments of destruction under the orders of officers who seek power, territory and fortune. In its critique of the generals and military power, therefore, the novel offers a useful analogy for unveiling the hypocrisy and self-interest that lie hidden behind bourgeoisie ideology. Osime's solution is the formation of a third army; one that fights the greedy politicians, businesspersons and generals. A total revolution, powered by the third army could eliminate the corrupt officials reigning at the top of all sectors of Nigerian society and replace it with rule by those who love the land, work the land and therefore respect it and its inhabitants.

Iyayi's criticism of Nigerian society is relentless in all three novels, but among the dire revelations and depressing reality of the polarities of privation and opulence in Nigeria, he offers an encouraging creed for social change. A people are never conquered; defeated, yes, but never conquered.

The collection's fifteen stories create a gallery of tortured souls, poignantly imagined and rendered visibly luminous by Iyayi's piercing psychological descriptions. As in the novels, the main character's crisis, no matter how unique or personal, often reflects the political chaos and social disintegration of the nation at large. For example, the opening story, 'Jegep's Madness', is about a mutually destructive marriage that ruinously ends a rich bureaucrat, Mr. Throttle Cheat-Away, offers the husband advancements only so that he can rape the wife. The title story, 'Awaiting Court Martial', is a dreamlike, first person confession made by a once-efficient executioner of the state. The doomed soldier did not give the order to shoot his latest victim, his brother, who came boisterously laughing to his own execution. The brother's laughter disarms and ridicules the effectiveness of the mass execution, transforming the marksmen into boys simply 'spitting at the sun.' Uniting the stories are themes also prevalent in Iyayi's novels: political corruption, interpersonal cruelty, the nightmarish threats of kidnapping, murder, home invasion or robberies, psychological obsessions, the power of dreams and folk values, and the political responsibility of the artist-intellectual – a few of the narrators seem to be Iyayi himself.

Conclusion

The doctrine of socialist realism clearly shows that change in society is historically necessary and inevitable. Firstly, there exist capitalist tendencies and practices, and the commoners' urge to free themselves from the shackles of subjugation.

Ernest Fischer admits that socialist realism implies the artist's fundamental agreement, with the aims of the working class and peasants and the emerging socialist world, just as mentioned and explained above. Socialist realism names the existing reality, which is capitalism and goes as far as exposing that a capitalist social formation, like all class societies, is inherently based on the exploitation of the majority by the minority. A socialist realist, because of his optimistic note, is determined to combat any passive acceptance of the present political and economic status quo. Moreover he has the peasantry and the working class not ridiculed but rather elevated to admirable level.

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