

OBSCENITY AS A REFLECTION OF REALISM IN DAMBUDZA MARECHERA' *HOUSE OF HUNGER* AND *BLACK SUNLIGHT*

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Abstract

Readers of African fiction today have found out that novelists have reacted sensitively and significantly to the current situation of the African nation. This realism in their works is concerned with the behavior of man, the individual being treated as an autonomous entity as he interacts with or grapples social structures, conventions and institutions. The novelists achieve this realistic presentation of events in their novels through employing various techniques in their works. This essay attempts to explore obscenity as a technique employed by Dambudzo Marechera in his novels, *House of Hunger* and *Black Sunlight*. The essay will establish that obscenity as employed by the writer is not there to amuse or excite the reader but serves as a reflection of realistic situations in his society. Obscene language and imagery serve as a strategy to arouse contempt, feeling of disillusionment and dissatisfaction, thereby creating a dystopia of the idealist utopia society the Zimbabweans anticipate. To establish this fact, this essay will trace the origin and phases of African fiction; pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial as well as realism and its variants.

Key Words: realism, obscenity, fiction, modernism, postmodernism

Introduction

In every human society, literature is usually a very important means of understanding the culture and tradition of the people from whom it emanates. It follows also that people's experience shapes

their conception of what constitutes reality. In this regard, obscenity in African fiction underlines some of the social ills created by the emergent modern society: the growth of urbanization and civilization, cultural contradictions, political and economic instability, corruption, nepotism and artistic revolution. What is common to the texts of this period is the way the authors are able to represent what is going on in their various societies through the dirt and excrement and presentation of abnormal sexual relations among the various characters. For instance, Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*, Tayeb Saih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* and so on.

Sexual imagery is prominently explored in novels representing postcolonial African states. This development is due to the great sense of disillusionment that characterized most independent African states. These writers in black and white, paint pictures of gloom and hopelessness in their novels. Some of these authors, in a deliberate manner break apart everything that suggests a unified and organized Africa in their narratives. They realize that to capture the psyche of the period, they need more than nostalgic representations of the past and the childish dreams of the present. Hence, in their narratives, little is left to the imagination in the portrayal of corruption and moral degradation, which characterized the period. In some of these narratives, the idea of a unified narrative technique is abandoned; the authorial voice is multiplied; what constitute reality is sometimes revised, while subjects which were once considered as obscene are highlighted to bring the decadence of the society to focus.

Realism

The evolution of the African novel has been ascribed to the colonial experience. Prior to this period, most of the literature of black Africa was oral. Story telling was popular and was at the time perhaps, the most widespread form of entertainment.

This is probably why the first phase of African fiction was termed, ‘the phase of cultural rehabilitation and critical self-examination. It started in Onitsha market literature with the publication of their pamphlets. Early novels like Joseph Casely Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound*, E.R Obeng’s *Eighteen pence*, Amos Tutuola’s *The palm-wine Drinkard followed this*. Writers like Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Ayi Kwe Armah, Camara Laye and others contributed in fighting colonialism with the publication of their novels. This cultural rehabilitation stage was used by novelists to discover and uphold African values.

In the second phase, the African became a man of two cultures and was faced with the problem of how to send the colonizers back to their land. This stage produced novels like Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *The River Between*, Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*, Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala* and many others. The third phase was a phase of internal realism. In Africa, this came about after the meeting of Negro writers and artists in 1959 where they agreed that a firmly realistic and committed basis should be the focus of African Literature.

Although the controversy over the term ‘realism’ and what constitutes reality dates back to Aristotle’s discussion of mimesis, realism as a literary term did not become a serious subject of literary discussion until nineteenth century. The modern consciousness of reality found its first expression in Stendhal, (also called Marie Henri Beyle) work *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830). A careful perusal of this novel reveals that the characters, their attitudes, and their relationships are very closely intertwined with the socio-political realities of their milieu. To comprehend fully the novels of Stendhal, one needs to have a detailed knowledge of the social stratification, the political situation and the economic circumstances of the period known as the Empire and Restoration in French history.

Honore de Balzac's novels however went a step further in laying the foundations of modern literary realism. In his diverse novels which he collectively called *La Comedie Humaine: chronique du dix-neuvieme siècle*, he made a representation of all facts of life in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. To Balzac, history does not signify the scientific investigations of the remote or distant past; rather it is concern with the present or at most with a very recent past. Therefore, Stendhal and Balzac remain the real initiators of modern literary realism. In American literature, the term 'realism' encompasses the period of time from the civil war to the turn of the century during which William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Mark Twain, and many others wrote fiction devoted to accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts. As the United States grew rapidly after the civil war, the increasing rates of democracy and literacy, the rapid growth in industrialism and urbanization, an expanding population base due to immigration, and a relative rise in middle class affluence provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture.

In drawing attention to this connection, Amy Kaplan in *Social Construction of American Realism* has called realism a "strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change" (2001:9). Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude", realism is a literary technique practised by many schools of writing. It is an approach to art in which subjects are portrayed in a straightforward manner as much as possible, without idealizing them. The view of the contemporary African writers towards realism which they adopted from Europe encouraged them to break out of their individual crises and consider the general situation of their society. This implies that every work of a novelist should have a contemporary issue which the novelist wishes to shed light on. Since

art is never created in a vacuum, thus in every fiction published, the critic is interested in understanding the social milieu in which it is set. So far, we have tried to establish the importance of realism in African literature. As Chidi Amuta rightly declares:

The writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it. People may mould their lives upon the patterns of fictional heroes and heroines. (1986:40)

This is necessary since art; fiction in this case, is a realistic depiction of life. The writer's sole aim is to affect the way his society views things through his (writer) careful selection and portrayal of events and characters in his works.

Naturalism

Many critics have suggested that there is no clear distinction between realism and naturalism in fiction. Gomez De Silva Opines that :

The theory of naturalism and realism are very similar, when distinction is made, it is that naturalism emphasizes the role of heredity and of environment upon the development of human character, people are conceived as motivated primarily by biological, social and economic forces over which they have no control. (1991:322)

Hence, while realism concerns itself primarily with the behavior of man, the individual being treated as an autonomous entity, naturalism goes beyond this to take into account the individual's environment: social structures, conventions and institutions which determine the make-up of a particular individual. Put simply, one rough distinction made by critics is that realism espousing a deterministic philosophy and focusing on the lower classes is considered naturalism. Commenting on this, Gakwandi notes:

... the individual is treated as a social unit, most often he is Silhouetted against the institution, traditions and general behaviour of his society. So as to underscore his insignificance, his aspirations, achievements and disappointment are seen as conditioned by his place in a given society and can be used to raise wider ethical moral and social issues. (1977:126-7).

Social-Realism

As predominantly social-realist literature, the contemporary African novel emphasizes the mimetic and didactic, and is therefore socially oriented. The seventies-to-date have witnessed a more inward looking social realist novel. Most of the contemporary African novels are reflections of the realities of post-independence Africa, with its inherent cultural contradictions, political and economic instability, corruption, sexual promiscuity, rape and nepotism. In essence, the sociological background of the writer will be seen to have formed a constant pressure on both the form and content of their literary works. In his article, "History as the Hero of the African Novel", Lewis Nkosi confirms the acute sense of social realism in the contemporary African novel. He declares:

To my mind, these are just a few writers whose works have sometimes dramatized moments in history when events have seemed to loom larger than any individual; they are novelists who have followed with keen interest, the political moments, the social and economic conflicts which have decisively shaped some recent African history. (1983:31)

Socialist Realism

Realism again occurs in another context, namely socialist realism. Socialist realism, an offshoot of social realism is largely a

Russian phenomenon whose theory was formulated by Anatoli Lunacharsky (1875-1933). Socialist realism lays a critical emphasis on a literature which is not divorced from its community; which speaks for it, and is committed to promoting the good of the community. The socialist realist novelist is a committed writer who, through his works, is dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programmes, more especially those which are political, ideological and in aid of social reform. In his fiction, the socialist realist writer portrays himself as a committed propagandist who is submissive to a particular regime.

As an ideology of emancipation, socialist realism is committed to the cause of the masses and the oppressed. This commitment is expressed in the context of addressing more concrete socio-economic and socio-political issues in the African world. The ideologies of socialist realism identify the oddities in the social setting and go beyond that by proffering panaceas to them. In their view, a solution is found in revolution. Thus, the African revolutionary novel is a product and a depiction of socialist literature. Such novels as Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* and *The Stone Country* are good examples.

Modernism

Modernism was a movement that criticized the many practices of the pre-twentieth century critical approaches. All forms of art-literature, architecture, painting and music –were stripped of their embroidery for a more abstractionist and fragmented expression. Elizabeth Ermarth gives a more illuminating exposition of the term “modernist Novel” She asserts:

The term ‘modern’, for example, has a local and a broader meaning; in its local meaning it refers to what is conventionally called the period of modernism extending from about the 1890s to the Second World

War... but in its more general meaning the term ‘modern’ refers to the period that began with Renaissance and experienced mutation somewhere near the middle of the twentieth century. (1990:645)

In the modernist novel, the new structures of feeling, which emerge, are those of absence, dislocation and desire. That is, the idea of aesthetics is abandoned or radically modified, as such, instead of unity what we have is fragmentation; the idea of art for art’s sake tends to be promoted; that is, there is a belief in the self sufficiency of the text; at times, perversity becomes a dominant motif as the subject matter in the modernist novel often tends to surprise, excite, shock or terrify the reader.

Post Modernism

In architecture, postmodernism is a term used in describing a style that supersedes twentieth century modernism. Although, there is no clear consensus about the meaning of postmodernism among scholars of art and criticism, postmodernist writers are known for writing reflexive or meta-fiction, that is, fictions that reflect their own fictional illusions.

In an attempt to demystify myths, postmodernist literature is noted for its deliberate effort to efface the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction, between literary genres and between high and low culture. Postmodernism also includes the challenging of borders and limits including those of decency. For instance, books after 1968 begin to celebrate what hitherto had been banished from circulation. Lye (1999:2) links this idea to the idea of carnival championed by Bakhtin. “Bakhtin’s idea of carnival, of joyous, anti-authoritarian, riotous, canal and libratory celebration is very important in this connection”. This implies that, to live and think beyond modernist totalizing practices, one must deliberately violet what appear to be standards of decency. Hence, postmodernist writers consider no

terrain too uncanny or indecent to tread. In this connection, the vivid portrayal of sex in postmodernist fiction is not strange.

Obscenity

The realm of obscenity is large and, at times not easily definable. Those who have commented on the subject seem to agree that obscenity is a phenomenon of human culture and literary history, only what can properly constitute the ‘obscene’ varies from age to age and from one community to another. In *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, the first meaning listed for ‘obscene’ is “offensive to the senses or to taste or refinement: disgusting, filthy, foul, abominable, and loathsome”. New English Dictionary second definition is commonly used in our society: ‘offensive to modesty or decency; expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas, impure, lewd’. The difficulty with this definition however, lies in determining what is unchaste, indecent, or lewd; for the meaning attached to these words vary from one individual to another.

In *Wikipedia* (the free Encyclopedia) obscenity is said to be derived from the Latin word *Obscenus*, meaning “foul, repulsive, detestable, and the term is most often used in a legal context to describe expression (words, images, actions) that offend the prevalent sexual morality of the time”. Despite its long formal or informal use with a sexual connotation, the word obscenity still retains the meaning of inspiring disgust, inauspicious and ill omen. Obscenity as an aspect of postmodernism has been a constant feature in literature in recent years. The question however is whether the ‘obscene’ expressions and imagery seen in a work of fiction today are used purely for artistic experimentation or are there perhaps, some salient messages that the writers want to deliver with such a technique. Before the enactment of the Obscene Publication Act, Judge Augustus explicitly rejected the practice of judging a book by an isolated passage or passages. According to Hyde:

The question in each case is whether a publication taken as a whole has a libidinous effect. As to Joyce's work, he said 'the book as a whole not pornographic, and while in not a few spots it is coarse, blasphemous and obscene, it does not in our opinion tend to promote lust. The erotic passages are submerged in the book as a whole and have little resultant effect. (1964:184)

In this essay, obscenity is taken to mean profanity. Also any words, actions and gestures that are taboo, indecent, abhorrent, or disgusting shall be termed obscene. Thus, two poles of obscenity, sex and excrement will be analyzed in the selected novels.

Dambudzo Marechera

Dambudzo Marechera was born on June 4, 1952, in Vengere Township in Rusape, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). His father, Isaac Marechera, was a mortuary attendant and his mother, Masvotwa Venezia Marechera, was a maid for the white families that lived in the whiter area not far from the township. He had nine siblings, himself being the third. Marechera was, even as a child, exceptionally gifted, and his favorite pastime was reading. In school he was always top of his class. He was also very attached to his parents, and so his world was unhinged when his father Isaac Marechera was killed in 1966 by a hit-and-run driver. Left with nine children to bring up, unable to pay the rent, Marechera's mother was evicted from her house in 1969, and the family moved to an even grimmer neighborhood, mainly inhabited by prostitutes, pimps, and petty criminals. She eventually took to drinking and prostitution. It was at this time, at thirteen years of age, that Marechera left home. Mostly he was escaping the shame of his family, the poverty, the chaos and the pain.

Marechera was accepted at the prestigious St. Augustine Secondary School in 1966. It was a Catholic school, the first secondary school in the country to accept black students, and the

teachers, mostly white, tried as much as possible to shield their black pupils from the harsh racial climate outside. But the real world awaited him as soon as he got to university, the University of Rhodesia as it was then known. The mood there was racially charged, with the black students on one side of the line and the whites on the other. On the recommendation of some of his lecturers, Marechera was granted a Common Room scholarship to study at New College, Oxford where he was later expelled.

After leaving Oxford he went into a kind of hibernation; in some accounts he claimed to have been living in a tent by the river in Oxford, while in other accounts he claimed to have stayed with two rather shadowy friends, Shelagh and Peter, who converted their kitchen into a room for him. What is certain though is that it was at this period, after the sobering effect of his expulsion that he wrote *The House of Hunger*. Published in December 1978, *The House of Hunger* is set in 1970s Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), in the repressive years of Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) of the white minority government of Ian Smith. These were also the years of the war of independence. The story opens with the nameless narrator leaving the “The House of Hunger”; on the way he stops at a bar where he runs into friends—first Harry, then Julia—the bar then becomes the immediate, concrete setting of the story, and from then on the narrative progresses in seemingly unconnected flashbacks and lengthy digressions.

Marechera’s second book, *Black Sunlight*, was published in 1980. The novel reflects Marechera’s growing paranoia. The book’s setting is not specified; the story roughly traces the fortunes of a group of anarchists/revolutionaries who are in revolt against, and finally lose out to, a military-fascist-capitalist opposition. The central character is a press photographer, Chris, whose camera lens becomes the device through which Marechera often cleverly unravels the story’s incidents;

other important characters through whom the story is sometimes focalized are a group of young women, one being Chris's blind wife. Marechera's style here becomes even more obscurantist and autobiographical. The digressions become longer, until the story line totally disappears to be replaced by long political and philosophical discourses on history and power and anarchism and race. The expletives become more profuse, more colorful. In an interview he says: "In *Black Sunlight* I really tried to put terrorism into a historical perspective, neither applauding their acts nor condemning them. The photographer does not take sides, he just takes the press photographs."

Marechera finally decided to return to Zimbabwe in 1982. The process began when he was approached by the British TV station, Channel Four, with a proposal for a film based on *The House of Hunger*. The first part of the movie was to cover Marechera's rootless life in London, showing footage of the squats where he lived, while the remaining part was to cover his early years, as represented in the book, in Zimbabwe. The first part was realized successfully, but trouble began as soon as Marechera and the film crew arrived in Zimbabwe. According to Veit-Wild: "The Marechera myth had preceded the writer's return to Zimbabwe. Press coverage recounted the highlights of his legendary career: the attempt to set fire to an Oxford College; throwing crockery at the Guardian Fiction Prize Ceremony; detention and triumph in West Berlin. He sleeps all day, writes till he is exhausted, and drinks himself senseless until dawn."

First, Marechera was informed at the airport that his book, *Black Sunlight*, had been banned in Zimbabwe. Then out of the blue he decided that the producer, Chris Austin, a white South African, was being neo-colonial and exploitative in his dealings with the black crewmembers. Marechera and Austin finally fell out, and their contract was cancelled. Marechera was kicked out of the plush hotel that the TV Company had booked him into. And so began his next

five years in the streets of Harare. He had left Zimbabwe eight years earlier, when it was under a white minority government; now it was ruled by a black majority government, but as far as he could see, nothing much had changed. He could see clearly through the fog of independence euphoria that it was not about the person in office, it was about power. He said in an interview: “Our revolution has only changed life for the new black middle class, those who got degrees overseas during the struggle . . . for those who committed themselves to become fighters. . . . Most of them are now unemployed and live on the streets.”

In Marechera’s narratives, *The House of Hunger and Black Sunlight*, obscenity is moved to the centre with an insistence on foul language and an obsession with scatology. In the narratives, the myth of secrecy surrounding sexual intercourse is exploded. People of all ages indulge in sexual activities in brutal manners without any regard for morality. Sex, like drugs and alcohol, serves as a form of release from the “maddening world”. Hence, sex, in the novels, is explicitly treated as an instrument of domination. This domination is portrayed in *The House of Hunger* where a man rapes his wife in full view of an applauding audience:

He was cursing all women to hell as he did so. And he seemed to screw her forever; he went on and on until she looked like death. When at last – the crowd licked its lips and swallowed – when at last he pulled his penis out of her raw thing and stuffed it back into his trousers, I think she seemed to move a finger, which made us all wonder how she could have survived such a determined assault (50).

The House of Hunger is set in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the time of white minority and black guerilla struggle. It is the abnormality of this society that Marechera strives to portray with the explicit

depiction of violent sex. Thus, in the above quote, obscene sex is used metaphorically to describe the intimidating and mocking nature of colonialism, like the woman in the above scene; Africans have had to endure much agony from the colonizers. Colonialism did not just treat Africans like sub-standard beings; this treatment is publicly justified in the people's opinion.

Europeans who came to Africa pretended to be civilizing the continent when, in actual fact, what they did to Africans can be likened to rape. They stole and plundered African resources while meeting out untold agony to the owners, the indigenous people. This act amounts to public psychological assault, which Marechera tries to depict in his novels. Thus, the texts deal with the effects of events of the external world on individual people. The issues portrayed in the narratives take place in the context of war and racism in Zimbabwe, but Marechera focuses our attention not on events as abstractions, but on their effects on the individual soul, the individual mind, and on inter-personal relationships. The treatment of sex in Marechera's novels is usually an aspect, which provides clues to understanding the nature of life and interpersonal relationship. Its value is more than literary; it performs artistic, political and social functions. Sex is employed in his fictions to signify the sordid state of his society and to shock his readers into consciousness. *In The House of Hunger*, sexual and political awareness are portrayed as an integral part of critical consciousness. Marechera writes,

We were whores; eaten to the core by the syphilis of the white Man's coming. Masturbating onto a playboy centrefold; screaming abuse at a solitary but defiant racist; writing angry 'black' poetry; screwing pussy as though out to prove that white Men do not in reality exist this was all contained within the circumvention of our gut-rut (75).

Hence, the almost pathological graphic imagery in the novel expresses the author's disgust at the colonial penetration of Africa both in the sexual and political senses. Rhodesia, in this narrative, is shown to be an epitome of abnormality like the woman overflowing with semen.

Its just that we could see on the gravel road Splotches and stains of semen that were dripping down her as she walked. Years later I was to write a story using her as a symbol of Rhodesia (49).

In this regard, the social vices textualized in *The House of Hunger* propel the disillusionment of the typical victim in the desperate situation. That is, the misdeeds of the characters signify the influence of society on them. Typical in this instance is the character, Peter, who apart from violently beating up his wife, 'screws' her in the presence of his brother, the narrator.

I returned ... He was screwing her underneath the table. Before I could retreat Peter said crossly: 'Come in: sit down. This is home, man. Anyone would think you'd wandered into Daniel's lions' den (27).

It is only a man who has lost all sense of and values for decency that would choose to 'screw' his wife under the table in full view of his brother. The author's use of the word 'screw' and the setting of the action under the table depict the debased nature of this encounter. It also indicates the absence of moral and values in the society at large.

This lack of values is probably why Peter's father presents him with a venereal disease set on his birthday; indicating that the extent of debasement and corruption in that society lies beyond the individual. For, against the background of brutal sexual acts, is a general aura of chaos, confusion and despair with the 'fighting boys', 'drinking boys', 'crying baby', 'buzzing flies', and 'beaten wives'.

Whenever mother took away my sheets to wash them, She would make me explain every single stain on them. Since

they were invariably stained with semen she would contemptuously give me a long sermon about how girls are 'easy' and 'why don't you get on with laying one or two? Or three, or four, or five. 'There is nothing to it, 'she said. 'You stick it in the hole between the water and the earth, it's easy. She splays out her legs and you bunch your pelvis between her thighs and strike!..... (78)

The foregoing passages show that the society is full of chaos and social ills. That a mother would teach her son such unexpected 'sexual ethics' is baffling; it shocks the reader while portraying that the society is in a moral dilemma. Overt sexuality also links the female characters, in the novel, to a wider paradigm of colonial exploitation. Nesta takes to prostitution as a means of survival. Impregnated by a married man, she is thrown out of her home at a very tender age. She describes her white clients as abnormal creatures who always want something beyond the ordinary:

'White men have a thing about black women, you know Most wouldn't even touch me. They'd just make me do things and they'd watch with their eyeballs sticking out. And masturbate like hell. But there was one who always had the same old thing. I would suck his balls and he would come off into my hair (51).

She also gives the example of a customer called Billy, who calls her mother and fucks her to the sound of Shostakovitch's 'Leningrad'.

The most obvious motif in *The House of Hunger* is encapsulated in the often-repeated word, 'stain'. At the literary level, 'stains' refers to bodily fluids, excrement and blood. At the moral and aesthetic level, reference to semen relates to the colonial exploitation of Africa.

In yet another context, 'stains' refers to a domain of sexual license, which epitomises Zimbabwean society under the pressures of

modernization and urbanization. The motif of 'stains' as blood is even more common than semen and excrement. It means the innocent blood of the citizens wasted in brutality. This has a personal, autobiographical context. Marechera slightly changes the circumstances of his own father's death (killed in a traffic accident) to have the narrator's father killed by a more symbolically resonant vehicle, a train:

The old man died beneath the wheels of the twentieth century. There was nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh... And the same thing is happening to my generation.(45)

Thus, in this 'house of hunger' rules the lovelessness of assaults, an adulterous mother, a drunken father, and a sibling trained in the ways of the street; all wallowing in despair, squalor, and penury.

While Marechera reaches out to his immediate society in *The House of Hunger*, continental issues are examined in his *Black Sunlight*. The novel offers a macroscopic portrait of the black or human race from the perspective of the Rhodesian (Zimbabwean) experience. *Black Sunlight* is couched in a fragmentary manner, showing that the society he writes about is in an era of turbulence, transition and disorder. In this novel, Marechera foregrounds the new strains and tensions plaguing the African society.

Like in *The House of Hunger*, we come across the use of expletives and images of excretion and putrefaction in *Black Sunlight*;

Father! Father! Why the fucking shit did you conceive me? You have no meaning. I have no meaning. The meaning is in the swinging. And that is ridiculous. Absurd. Ha! That fucking bitch, my mother, why did you open up to receive him?" (3)

In *The House of Hunger and Black Sunlight*, Marechera also provides us with some of the pungent scatological images of corruption, decadence, alienation and despair. The following passage from *The House of Hunger* portrays scatological images.

One's mind became the grimy rooms, the dusty cobwebs in which the minute skeletons of one's childhood were forever in the spidery grip that stretched out to include not only the very stones upon which one walked but also the stars which glittered vaguely upon the stench of our lives. Gut-rut, that was what one steadily became. And whatever insects of thought buzzed about inside the tin can of one's head as one squatted astride the pit-latrine of it, the sun still climbed as swiftly as ever and darkness fell upon the land as quickly as in the years that had gone (4; my emphasis)

And in *Black Sunlight*, we also come across some instances of scatological imagery:

There is always somebody on the run. From weird judges, fucking pigs, filthy neighbors, from the shit inland, revenue ... The more presence of the fucking pigs is enough ... mother-fucking Buddha ... covered in human shit, chicken shit and pricking all over with ghostly spears (9).

Actually, the preponderant use of scatological images in Marechera's works is a reflection of the debilitating and disgusting nature of Marechera's experience. Also by treating the trope of sex, Marechera seeks to depict the sordid state of his society, as well as shock his readers into consciousness. Hence, the open treatment of sex merely mirrors the ugly realities of life in the Zimbabwean society. The Southern African society was a sick one, which over the years has

accumulated filth and grime. Thus, the ill-pervasive nausea, the dirt and smell from the gory sights in *The House of Hunger and Black Sunlight* are in many ways a physical realization of a shameful inversion of ethics.

These novels isolate a background of discontent and disillusionment with the past, present and future situations in the author's society. In *The House of Hunger*, the defiling imagery of excrement and bodily corruption expresses the narrator's insecurity in a world without stable metaphysical and moral values. This is typified by the conceit of the musical latrine flies:

A cloud of flies from the nearby public toilet was humming Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. It was an almost perfect photograph of the human condition. (10-11)

The contemporary of the author's sordid experience is seen as a recurrence of an obnoxious historical development.

His arm swept the panorama of barbed wire, whitewashed houses, drunks, prostitutes, the angelic choirs of god-created flies, and the dust that erupted into little clouds of divine grace wherever the golden sunlight deigned to strike. His god-like gesture stopped abruptly- pointing straight at the stinking public lavatory (11)

In Marechera's fiction, therefore, the Zimbabwean/African society is presented, through obscene sexual and scatological imagery, as one big theatre of decadence. The scenes are filled with people at different stages of mental and physical decomposition. They wallow in the filth of the environment and internalise it.

Conclusion

From this study, it is obvious that obscenity is employed in African fiction as a technique for the writers' depiction of reality in their various societies. Traditionally in African culture, it is regarded as taboo for people to talk about sex openly. This is evident in some

African novels where there is little or no reference to sexual organs or images, like in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Great Pond*, Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between* and many others. Even in some novels where sex is employed as a theme as in Beti's *Mission to Kala* and *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Oyono's *Houseboy* and Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* one discovers that the sexual act is rarely explicitly portrayed. Hence, the writer under study stand out in his use of sexual images in his novels.

Marechera's enormous contribution to African literature is often underrated for so many reasons, one being the sheer impenetrability of his prose style. And the other, his explicitly deployment of obscene language and imagery. He is nothing like any African writer before him.; up until the time he appeared, the leading writers, like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ayi Kwei Armah, had written in an accessible, social realist mode, and most of the writers that came immediately after them adopted the same style, not only because of the earlier writers' influence, but also because of the effectiveness of this very accessible style in presenting the anti-colonial, nationalist themes that had become the predominant concern of early post-colonial African fiction. But Marechera, heavily influenced by the European modernists, departed emphatically from the tradition, choosing the rather self-reflective, technically ostentatious stream-of-consciousness mode, deploying obscenity as reflection of reality in Zimbabwean society.

The novelist shows a consciousness of the necessity to portray the socio-historical realities of his societies in his fictions through obscene imagery.

In *The House of Hunger* and *Black Sunlight*, Marechera strives to capture the spirit of disintegration and disillusionment that characterized Zimbabwe in particular, and African society in general,

in the period of white domination. Obscenity in these novels therefore, reflects a sick society, a society hungry for peace, tenderness and affection.

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