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Aesthetics and the Roots of Socialist Realism in African Literature

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Abstract

The matter of aesthetics in literature is more profound than in most other forms of art. As children, the whiff of a brand-new book and the illustrations on the cover of a reader greatly excite us as things of beauty. As we mature in reading, however, we now know that we have to go beyond the beautiful cover of a book: a novel, a play or a collection of poems to find the real beauty in that book. Now beauty in art, literature, becomes philosophical; it becomes the artistic ways and means by which the writer tries to play on our hearts' desires for the pleasure that comes from a story and its message. The critical realist writers simply present a picture of what Chinua Achebe describes as "the burning issues" in society, cast literary innuendos at the villains that represent the actual leadership villains in society, and leave the matter there, maybe for God to take action. The Marxist or socialist realist writers, however, think differently. They posit that man, not God, is responsible for the rot in society, and so man, not God, has to change the narrative by overthrowing the societal despoilers and the socio-political status quo. Therefore, this paper accounts for the emergence of the Marxist literary work of art in which the masses, the marginalized have-nots, are pitches against the privileged, capitalist haves who they eventually dislodge in a revolution. That is the revolutionary aesthetics or the Marxist socialist realist literature.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Marxist, Socialist, Realist, Literature.

The aesthetic experience is any experience which evokes in the mind that sense of order, of symmetry, of a unique vision and of a sense of beauty, generally. Thus, according to George Santayana, even in ordinary everyday human life, great sacrifice of time and labour is made to aesthetic considerations such that man would not "select his dwelling, his clothes, or his

companions without reference to their effect on his aesthetic senses" (13). So, in his book, *The Sense of Beauty*, he pays glowing tributes to 'beauty', the aesthetic, saying:

It is an affection of the soul, a consciousness of joy, a pure pleasure. It suffuses an object without telling why; nor has it any need to ask the question. It justifies itself and the vision it gilds; ...beauty exists for the same reason that the object which it beautifies exists or the world in which that object lies, or we that look upon both. It is an experience: there is nothing more to say about it. (182)

Beauty means different things to different visioners, however. And it is only an aggregate of these observations that can attempt to wholistically define the subject. Thus, such followers of Plato as Santayana would dwell on the "divine" nature of the "ideals of beauty" (23) which consists in "imagination and emotion" (14). He sees aesthetics as purely "intrinsic", though manifesting in objects as their "quality", (28) while Adolfo S. Vazquez refers to Immanuel Kant's theory that beauty resides in the form of an object. Therefore, he talks of the "Kantian formalism" (13) as that aesthetic theory which lays emphasis on form as the main purveyor of beauty.

Bernard Berenson, an art historian, acknowledges Benedetto Croce as "the most authoritative of contemporary writers on aesthetics" (18). He uses 'contemporary' here in the sense of 'the most recent' or 'the most modern' of the time of his writing. According to George C. Wickie, Groce metaphysically sees art as intuitive knowledge or intuition - an image in the mind of the artist - such that the physical thing which an artist produces "is simply an aid (a tip of the ice berg) to help in the recreation of art in the mind of the appreciator." (237) Based on that he also developed his intentionistic critical philosophy which supposes that since art exists only in the mind of the artist, a valid critical analysis of a work of art must include the known intensions of the artist. This has been debunked by anti-intensionistic aesthetic philosophers who contend that a work of art should be able to stand on its own and have face-value meaning, otherwise "...Shakespeare's plays for example, cannot be evaluated or interpreted since we do not know exactly what Shakespeare intended". (234-235). The aesthetic thinkers of this period (19th and early 20th centuries) made a recourse to the sensuous, the mind, as the main arena of the artistic appreciation of beauty. Their conception of aesthetics, as Berenson further observes, is that it has to do with intuition as opposed to logical or conscious reasoning. In line with this conception of the aesthetic as spontaneous and momentary, he describes the aesthetic moment --that moment of the incubation of the senses of beauty in the mind--as:

That fleeting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, or with actuality of any kind that the spectator himself sees in terms of art,...the two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness. When he recovers workaday consciousness, it is as if he had been initiated into illuminating, exalting formative mysteries. In short, the aesthetic moment is a moment of mystic vision. (93)

In contrast, an earlier (medieval) aesthete, St. Thomas Aquinas, though a catholic theologian, followed the creative philosophy of Aristotle which emphasizes the primacy of intelligence. In this light, Drabble, in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, says that "He presents in his writings... the harmony of faith and reason, and in particular the reconciliation of Christian theology with Aristotelian philosophy"(36). But the aspect of St. Thomas' philosophy which is most relevant to the development of revolutionary aesthetics is his literary methodology, in forms of pros and cons (argumentative) questions and in pedagogy as well as in simple language. This directly tallies with the highly argumentative and pedagogic form of revolutionary aesthetics literature which later developed after Karl Marx.

Also, in another light, that of seeing art as a humanized reality, Hegel proposed his theory of the transcendental and abstract nature of art as well as its objectification in man's practical activity. According to him, art:

has its source in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness... The things of nature are only immediate and single but man as mind reduplicates himself, in as much as *prima facie* he is like the things of nature, but in the second place...perceives himself, has ideas of himself, thinks himself, and only thus is active self-realizedness. This consciousness of himself man obtains in a two-fold way: in the first place theoretically, insofar as he has inwardly to bring himself into his own consciousness, with all that moves in the human breast, all that stirs and works therein, and generally, to observe and form an idea of him, to fix before himself what thought ascertains to be his real being, in what is summoned out of his inner self as in what is received from without, to recognize only himself. Secondly, man is realized for himself by practical activity inasmuch as he has the impulse, in the medium which is directly given to him to produce himself, and therein at the same time to recognize himself... This need traverses the most manifold phenomena, up to the mode of self-production in the medium of external things as it is known to us in the work of art. (57-58)

Note that the point being made here is that, even though Hegel recognized art as a form of man's objectification of himself through creativity, he saw this objectification only in its spiritual and abstract essence. However, this proposition of his incidentally laid a solid foundation on which Karl Marx's concrete materialist objective theory of aesthetics was to rest, though Marx believed that art or aesthetics has a much more human function, where Hegel believed in the more spiritual and abstract essence of aesthetics. Adolfo S. Vazquez would thus reason that Hegel's contribution to Marxist aesthetics lies in his recognition of art as a "practical", and not a theoretical "activity", and that it is a means of man's affirmation of himself, his "self consciousness, in external things." (56-57).

Marx, while acknowledging Hegel's fundamental contribution, so to say, to the argument on the aesthetics of art, disagreed with his notion of art as entirely a thing of the spirit. In the first place, if art is practical, as Hegel agreed, it follows naturally that it is meant to satisfy a practical, material, human need. Marx thus sees art rather as the enterprise with which man manifests himself in creative work. As a matter of fact, Marx likens the need for the artist to "externalize" himself, or his creative need, in an "object" (art) to the "Hunger" need of the body which it externalizes in an essential object (food). Hence Marx says, "[h]unger is a natural need; it therefore needs a nature outside itself, an object outside itself, in order to satisfy itself, to be stilled. Hunger is an acknowledged need of my body for an object existing outside it, indispensable to its integration and to the expression of its essential being" (181).

The same can also be said of man's sex need among other essential needs. With the above submission, Marx brought art down to earth from the abstract, spiritual and metaphysical plane where Hegel had placed it. In that same light also, of the practical objectivity theory of art, Vazquez reasons that the uniqueness of Marx's theory of aesthetics lies in "his perception that the aesthetic, as a particular relationship between man and reality, has been forged historically and socially in the process of transforming nature and creating a world of human objects". (49)

This brings us to Marx's thesis on labour, the inseparability of work and art, and the issue of "Praxis", as man's means of objectifying, affirming as well as humanizing himself and reality. Vasquez sees the concept of Praxis as "what fundamentally distinguishes dialectical-materialist aesthetics from idealist and metaphysical materialist aesthetics of Hegel, for example". It is "the basis of the aesthetic relationship in general and of artistic creation in particular" (92). According to him, it enabled Marx to see not only the positive aspect of work but also its negative aspects.

Marx thus saw the ambivalent uses of work -- one, as a means for the human being to affirm his creative essence as a species being as well as provide for his needs in society, including his artistic needs (aesthetic needs) which also creates human wealth; and two, work in the form of "alienated labour" (53) in capitalism which creates "human wealth and misery". (42)

Hegel is said to be the greatest of the 19th century philosophers, according to Morris Cohen (as quoted by Carl J. Friedrich), mainly because he influenced the very best of that era - Karl Marx. Hegel influenced Marx in both his dialectic process, the philosophy of law and ethics, his concept of historicism and of course in his view of art as a practical activity realized through "work", as already said above. Therefore, from Hegel's Dialectic Process which he (Hegel) states in terms of what Margeret Drabbel calls his world spirits "historical evolution" (454): from the state of "being" to "non-being" and to "becoming" (being-non-being-becoming) or thesis-anti-thesis - synthesis, Marx seems to have developed his own dialectic process which is more social and more revolutionary.

Also, according to Friedrich, Hegel's philosophy of Law and ethics, which states that "whatever is rational is actual and whatever is actual is rational" (51), favoured the revolutionary thinking of Marx. Marx thus reasoned that whatever is not rational in the political sphere lacks "actual reality" (51) and credibility and should be done away with. All the same, Marx's emphasis on history as a means of determining the nature of both the antecedent and ideal social and economic relations of man can be traced to Hegel's own history of the emergence of the free spirit. Hence Friedrich asserts that "all the worldwide sweep of historicism traces to the Hegelian emphasis on history..."(51)

The whole aim of Marxism in art, or Marx's philosophy of aesthetics, therefore, is to restore the essential value of artistic labour, to liberate art, as it were, from its alienatedness in capitalism. This process of liberating art from elitist and aristocratic domination is traceable to the Romantic period. William Wordsworth through his artistic revolution that actually defined and ushered in the Romantic Movement, sought to free man's intellect from its alienated state in the modern industrialized society of his time. This he did, principally, by introducing a language of poetry that was in line with the ordinary people's everyday language, which is in accord with man's fundamental needs of daily existence, as opposed to the hitherto obscure and elitist (bourgeois) form. By this very revolutionary tendency of his writing, Wordsworth ostensibly created a platform of language on which the people would ultimately be taught the rudiments of communism. Art and

life were demystified for the people. Man was now able to talk to man. It is on that simple language mode that the lyrical and persuasive arguments of Marxist literary works are still based. Through it, it becomes possible for the masses to be mobilized for revolutionary purposes.

Marx had an identical, though higher and more complex, artistic and social vision. He proposed a new and higher social order, more humane than capitalism, which came to be known as communism. His communist philosophy, as contained in his *Manuscripts and Capital*, which is predicated on the sociological principle of dialectical and historical materialism, sees society all through history as constantly polarized on the economic basis of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', the exploiting bourgeois class and the exploited proletariat. Also, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels say, "The history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle." (2) Therefore, there arises the need to change this system, this history, in the interest of the exploited people of the lower class through an overthrow of the decadent society. To that effect, Marxists generally believe that the material world precedes the essence, and therefore that man, and not God, is responsible for his society, in which case man can change his society if he desires, because we are responsible for what we are. Therefore, it is no much use trying to explain an unjust society or to reform it (as the conservative socialists, the German Socialists and the critical-utopian socialist literature of early 19th century Europe as well as the critical realist African writers of the pre and early post-independence tried in vain to do), instead "the most sensible thing to do is to change it" (4). The course of this change by means of a proletarian/communist revolution is just what Marx desired communist literature (socialist literature) to depict. Also, Vazquez advocates, "an understanding of Marxism as a philosophy of Praxis, more precisely of a praxis which aims to transform human reality radically (on a concrete historical level, to transform capitalist society) so as to establish a society in which humanity can give free rein to its essential powers, frustrated, denied, postponed, and emasculated for so long." Arguing further, he posits that "this understanding of Marxism as the true humanism, as the radical transformation of humanity on all planes, fulfills Marx's aspiration, already formulated in his youthful works, that "man's supreme being should be man himself." (10)

Marx himself made subtle statements about the necessity for man in society to free himself from the stranglehold of capitalist labour. As glimpses of his said 'youthful works' show:

The history of industry and the established objective of industry
are the open book of man's essential powers, the exposure to the

sense of human psychology. Hitherto this was not conceived in its inseparable connection with man's essential being, but only in an external relation of utility, because moving in the realm of estrangement, people could only think of man's general mode of being, religion or history in its abstract general character as politics, art, literature, etc. - as the reality of man's essential powers and man's species activity. We have before us the objectified essential powers of man in the form of sensuous, alien, useful objects, in the form of estrangement, displayed in ordinary everyday material industry. (140)

He adds, therefore, that:

It is only when the objective world becomes for man in society the world of man's essential powers--human reality, and for that reason the reality of his own essential powers--that all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become his objects: that is, man himself becomes the objects (and may I add, of society and government). (140)

Marx, and Engels-his closest ideological ally- believe that for a true transformation of society, a positive change, to take place, there has necessarily to be a revolution, a consequence of the intractable historical conflict between the forces of the working people wanting to liberate themselves and the bourgeois class wanting to maintain the status quo. According to Vazquez, Marx therefore sees revolutions as the "locomotives of history", just as Lenin was later to see them as "true popular festivals" (121). Frantz Fanon on his part sees them as "the terrible stone crusher, the fierce mixing machine". (40)

This theory of radical social change, well analyzed by Marx himself, obviously provided a much-needed framework for some societies under forms of social bondage to try to liberate themselves. And that explains the wave of revolutions that swept through Europe, especially Eastern Europe, in the 19th and 20th centuries, and in particular, the Russian revolution of October 1917. Literary criticism inevitably responded to this trend. Marxists both created and interpreted literature leaning on this phenomenal principle. Literature that depicted the plight of the working people, the proletariat, was thenceforth seen as 'progressive' and 'positive', while all others were seen as 'bourgeois' and 'decadent'. From all knowledge of art, and from the foregoing study, we can see that art is a thing in society. As is intellectually common knowledge, art and society develop side by side and influence each other to a reasonable degree. Society somewhat conditions art, while

art on its part influences the development of social and political thoughts, just like its allied superstructures of philosophy and religion. Thus, John Keats, a Romantic poet with exceptional "intellectual and spiritual passion for beauty", according to Matthew Arnold (qtd in Margeret Wabble [534]), subscribes to the material and actuality, so to say, of the beauty in art. Also, according to James E. Tobin et.al, Keats "came to realize that mere reliance on sensuous imagery was not enough..." and so by reading and by careful observation of humanity" (778) he sought, in his poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and especially in the poem's conceit:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty" - that is all

Ye know on earth,

and all ye need to Know"

to stress the beauty in the truthful depiction of social existence. As Bernard Berenson observes, "When in self-conscious times like our own, the public ends by seeing and feeling what artists have taught it to see, the witty remark that nature imitates art is justified; and to this day it remains a lively sally. (43)

Revolutionary aesthetics, therefore, resides in popular art. According to Arnold Hawser, popular art is unavoidably propaganda art to the extent that it is meant "to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulses to action or opposition...it presupposes forces beyond those of feeling and form..." (qtd in Ngugi's *Writers...*, 6-7). The striking forces which the works of popular art evoke in the people are of course those which will propel them to control and appropriate the economic output of their labour by the people themselves, a state of being which is only achievable through the instruments of a socialist or communist revolution.

To this we must add V.I. Lenin's idea of the partisan and class character of Literature, as expressed in his essay, "Party Organization and Party Literature." Here, as Vazquez sees it, he is of the view that the artist cannot be relevant in his society except his work reflects his allegiance to the revolutionary views of the people's party which is the communist party or the party of the popular class. That is to say, he must take a position for the popular class. In a word, he must be partisan. The total idea here is that a work of art can only attain its desired freedom and concreteness of purpose when it successfully aligns with the people's forces of social liberation, economic emancipation and political revolution.

All these, one way or the other point towards the idea of an authentic people's literature in line with the revolutionary ideals of Marx and Engels, as well as the Marxist socialist revolutionary ideology which was rudimentarily expounded by V.I. Lenin and given greater impetus and a more organized nationalist focus by Maxim Gorky. Therefore, in the views of Udena O. Udena, even though revolutionary literary thought had actually originated in Russia before the 1917 revolution, as exemplified in Gorky's *Mother*, it was after the revolution that it took proper root, articulating the ideological and philosophical imports of the revolution in art and literature. And it was Maxim Gorky and his Association of Russian Authors, according to Udena, who gave the movement a formal stamp of a national artistic ideology. Thus Udena defines revolutionary aesthetics as, "a specific ideological reaction to the contradictions of capitalist and semi-capitalist societies and a purveyor of a new vision of social reality embodied in the theory and practice of revolutionary change" (9).

Really, revolutionary aesthetics represents a form of art, which, in its eagerness to have a concrete human function, creates or advances the ideals of a classless society as opposed to the aristocratic class society of the preceding ages. It has incorporated the relevant features of the antecedent literary forms in its revolutionary apprehension of reality. For instance, it appropriates such diverse literary features as fantasy, humour, stylization and such like artistic experimentations. Its main thematic and ideological features, according to Frolov's Dictionary of Philosophy, include, "Service to the people, adherence to partisanship, close bonds with the working people's struggles, historical optimism and the rejection of formalism, subjectivism and nationalist primitivism." (352) It is nonetheless in the works of the German dramatist, Bertolt Brecht, that these features and more are made most manifest. In his Epic Theatre tradition, a highly stylized form of the socialist revolutionary drama, he employed historicity, popular characterization, simple and humorous dialectics and all forms of his 'alienation effect' technique to carve a niche for himself in revolutionary aesthetics. Therefore, we find the epitomization of this mode in such Brecht's plays as *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

The revolutionary aesthetics fire spread into African literature and made very remarkable success, with many extant plays and novels by African writers modelling the socialist realist mode. African literature was so swayed by the advent of this popular literary movement because of the dire need by African societies to liberate themselves from the peculiar economic, political and cultural siege occasioned by years of western imperialism and neo-imperialism. This exploitative social order,

over the years, naturally, had given rise to an unequal society, requiring a revolutionary transformation of the progressive socialist nature as the only way out. The fact that the said needed transformation into a communist classless state is possible in Africa was practically and politically demonstrated by the late President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, the model peoples' leader. In literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'O gave the clear perspective mandate that:

African Literature and its writers are on trial. We cannot stand on the fence. We are either on the side of the people or on the side of imperialism. African Literature and African Writers are either fighting with the people or aiding imperialism or the class enemies of the people. We believe that good theatre (good literature) is that which is on the side of the people, ... ("Preface" *The Trial*...)

Therefore, with his plays, *The Trial of Dethan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, his novels *Matigari*, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, among others, as well as in his many essays, beginning with *Homecoming*: ... he led other writers like Sembene Ousmane and Mongo Berti, to open a floodgate of Marxist socialist writers and creative works in African literature.

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