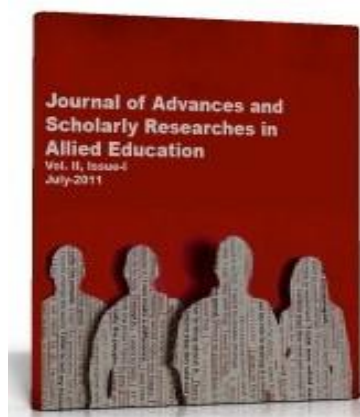


## A Psychoanalytic Reading of 'Marechera's Selected Novels



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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses three works of art namely 'House of Hunger', 'The Black Insider' and 'Mindblast' by one of Zimbabwe's most famous, talented and controversial authors, Dambudzo Marechera, using mainly psychoanalytic tools of inquiry. The aforementioned works of fiction have been carefully chosen to sample the writer's skills and concerns as a poet, playwright and novelist extraordinaire. These works, which were written between 1978 and 1984, give a fair representation of the said author's vast and varied skills whose works according to one critic 'read a little like a clever dissertation for a PhD' (Veit-Wild, 1992: 17) yet he never completed a first degree!

**Key words:** 'House of Hunger', 'The Black Insider', 'Mindblast'

## **INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Psychoanalysis 'reads the past in order to make sense of the present. Like a detective story, it starts with effects and traces these effects back to origins' (Jefferson and Robey (Eds), 1986: 150). Because psychoanalytic criticism realizes the importance of the background of the author (Selden and Widdowson, 1993; Bressler, 1994; Tilak, 1996), it is invaluable in the understanding and appreciation of Marechera's works which are 'so obviously autobiographical' (Wylie, 1995: 24). A vicar in Sheffield had earlier expressed similar sentiments when writing to James Currey who was responsible for the Heinemann (London) African Writers Series, saying that 'House of Hunger' is so obviously so much his own tortured autobiography' (Veit-Wild, 1992: 10). In a nutshell, the paper asserts that the most fertile ground for psychoanalytic inquiry in literature are those writers who strip themselves naked for all and sundry to peck and Marechera happens to be the best example of such a writer in Zimbabwe. In analyzing works of art it is of paramount importance to look at the key concepts: 'content' and 'form'. Content in literature can be defined as 'the matter, especially of a book or discourse: The subject matter' (Merriam-Webster, 1986: 492) while form is the structure as a whole, 'the general arrangement in words, phrases, clauses, sound effects, figurative and rhythmic devices all contribute to the effect of the whole' (Moody, 1987: 37). The two are closely intertwined (Eagleton, 1985). The 'form' can be seen as the physical structure of a work of art, its anatomy, while the content is its message, substance or 'chemical content'. In a nutshell, the form is the shell/package or conveyor belt of the message. The two are interwoven to give the total product.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED WORKS**

The first thing that strikes a reader of any piece of work is its title. The titles of the three works under scrutiny namely Marechera's 'House of Hunger', The Black 'Insider' and 'Mindblast' give a glimpse of the state of mind of the creator of the works during their writing.

‘House of Hunger’, as the title suggests, is first and foremost about simple lack of food, a situation which prevailed in the black part of the Rhodesian population to which the author belonged. The book is therefore a product of a hungry and angry artist. On the other hand, the hunger can be looked at as larger than the physiological: It is a hunger for human love and warmth and of a more fulfilling lifestyle for the blacks since the Rhodesian social scenario depicted in the book was devoid of these. The title, *The Black Insider* gives the unenviable situation of being an of exile-an ironical situation wher one finds oneself within a group of people but not with them. ‘Black’ in the title gives a metaphorical meaning of an unwelcome dark stain on an otherwise spotless surface. Through this title, Marechera wished to express his loneliness in London which ironically is one of the most populous towns on earth. There the society saw his black skin as ‘a natural label that read Mugger, Rapist, Amin, Inferior...’(Marechera, 1990: 77). The book is, for this reason, a manifestation of what was deep in his wounded psyche during its writing in London. In ‘Mindblast’, Marechera wanted to ‘blast the minds’ of the people of Zimbabwe who seemed to be basking in the euphoria of independence. In the book in which consumerism, political bigotry, corruption, deceptive socialist rhetoric and social injustices are tackled; the author seems to be asking: ‘Is this what all the fighting for independence was about?’ He also seems to be saying, let the black people not just see injustice and social decadence when done to them but that they should clean up their own self-inflicted social ills.

As a victim of violence at home, at school and in the society at large, as a black person during the trying colonial times (as reflected in *House of Hunger*) as well as languishing in a hostile exile environment (as depicted in *The Black Insider*) and finally as an alienated writer tramp in his own independent motherland as shown in *Mindblast*, Marechera ‘gives violent expression to all the violence his generation has experienced...’(Veit-Wild, 1993: 258). In *House of Hunger*, for instance he describes the condition of the Black people in Rhodesia thus:

“The underwear of our souls was full of holes and the crotch it hid was infested with lice. We were whores; eaten to the core by the syphilis of the white man’s coming, masturbating onto a ‘Playboy’ centerfold; screaming abuse at a solitary but defiant racist, baring our arse to the yawning pit latrine; writing ‘Black’ poetry...(Marechera, 1978: 75).”

In ‘Mindblast’ and ‘The Black Insider’, the author uses lots of similar four letter words, a style which became his trademark. The kind of language used previously, as in many other instances in the author’s works, bears testimony to the hostile environment in terms of aggression, both physical and sexual, the author was subjected to. Marechera says about his upbringing: “In my own case, I have been influenced to a point of desperation by the dogged though brutalized humanity of those among whom I grew. The actual lives, the way they flinched yet did not flinch from the blows dealt out to us day by day in the ghettos...The seething cesspit in which I grew in which all these I am talking about making something of their lives (Veit-Wild, 1992: 1)”. Some critics, for example, the Zimbabwe Censorship Board, described his language as highly offensive because of its obscenity and preoccupation, especially with perverted human sexuality (Veit-Wild, 1993). This can be understood by looking at how the author grew up: Sex was viewed as a tool to dominate the female folk who together with their male counterparts viewed its violent expression as normal. For instance, in an interview with Alle Lansu in February 1986, Marechera says: “As a kid, you learnt very brutally about sex because most of the men believed...as well as women-that the only way to show your wife or girlfriend that you love her is to beat her up occasionally...” (Veit-Wild, 1992: 3).” Related to the aforementioned is the imagery the author employs. For instance in House of Hunger he says: “I could not have stayed on in that ‘House of Hunger’ where every morsel of sanity was snatched from you the way some kinds of bird snatch food from the mouths of babes (Marechera, 1978: 1).”

The description gives a glimpse of the dog-eat-dog life in the Black ghettos. Similarly, in

‘Mindblast’, the Hararean sky is described as ‘malnutrition gray’ (Marechera, 1984: 148). Central to the two quotations given is the lack of food, a basic physiological need. The quotations show deprivation, which haunted and still haunts most people in independent Zimbabwe. As part of this less-privileged group, such linguistic constructions become part of the author’s spontaneous expression. In ‘Oxford, Black Oxford’ in line with the mood of his expulsion from Oxford University he says: “A few rusty spears of sunlight had pierced through the overhead drizzling clouds. Behind the gloom of rain and rust I could see a wizened but fearfully bloodshot sun...(Marechera, 1990: 118).” A different and more optimistic author would have welcomed the brief, rare sunny spells in a country like Britain and would have described them in more endearing diction. But since the author was in psychological turmoil, the pessimism reflected in his expression here and elsewhere is understandable.

Common in the three previous quotations, that is, the two from ‘House of Hunger’ and the one from ‘The Black Insider, is the juxtapositioning of the physical and the intangible. For example, he talks of ‘underwear of our souls’, morsel of sanity’ and ‘spear of sunlight’. The expression ‘underwear of our souls’ helps to emphasize the ‘innermostness’ of the feelings the author is describing. Both ‘underwear’ and ‘soul’ are phenomena associated with privacy, enigma and the inner being, whether physical or spiritual. In other words, he is talking about the very being, the core of the ghetto people’s lives. ‘Soul’ is something abstract and difficult to conceptualize therefore by juxtaposing it with ‘underwear’, a concrete object, the author assists the reader to visualize quite clearly what he is talking about. The same can be said about ‘morsel of sanity’ that shows the desperateness of the situation but the tragedy is that even that last tiny amount of sanity left is snatched in the dehumanizing conditions of the ‘House of Hunger’. The syntax is in some cases disconnected or incomplete just like the author’s life or that of fellow Africans and the marginalized. This style can be exemplified by the following passages: ‘Harare in heat. Whores in plenty. Sunlight harsh, stridently bright’... (Marechera, 1984: 119) and ‘The grime. The cheap and sordid details. That was my corner of London. Off Gray’s Inn Road. Its grit and dirt was ingrained in my character. Four years

of it...'(Marechera, 1990: 126).

The aforementioned quotations are comprised mainly of short incomplete statements, which give a jerky or staccato effect on the reading. They are meant to signify that all is not smooth going in the life of the narrators. In a nutshell, they help to depict a troubled universe. The said statements give an impression of narrators who are too emotionally charged to coherently articulate whatever is irking them. Marechera makes extensive use of flashback and reminiscence. These two are evidence of what Sigmund Freud refers to as the unconscious, which contains thoughts, memories and desires that are well below the surface of conscious awareness which, however, influence our behavior. Flashback and reminiscence can be viewed as retrieval of previously repressed memories. This is particularly true of Marechera's memories which all seem to point towards the purposelessness of human life. For example in 'Mindblast', he says: "I did not know where I was going and I did not care. I was carrying in a plastic bag all my possessions in the world...I probably looked burnt out, insane, people hurriedly got out of my way...(Marechera, 1984: 119)." The tone in the aforementioned extract, as in all his writings, is sad, resigned and mournful, and the I- narrative technique amplifies these characteristics as the reader tends to empathize more with the persona who is talking about his first-hand experiences as opposed to a more detached narrative voice. Here, as in other works such as 'House of Hunger', the narrator or protagonist is unnamed to show the 'commonplaceness' of the experiences of this one individual. The namelessness shows the typicality of the experiences and feelings the protagonist and those others marooned on similar social islands the world over. The aforementioned quotation from 'Mindblast', which resembles so much the opening of 'House of Hunger', does away with limits set by time and space and adopts a stream of consciousness technique mainly attributed to James Joyce. The stream of consciousness style is a serious attempt at capturing as faithfully as possible human thought processes, especially those normally inaccessible ones which lie interred in the unconscious, which manifest themselves in a far from neat manner hence the 'unneatness' often cited of Marechera's works for instance Wyllie describes 'The Black



Insider' as 'a million flying fragments of thought and imagination which are not designed to fuse and therefore fail to shake the reader except in spasms...(Veit-Wild, 1992:200). The previous description shows a high degree of insecurity in the ghettos as well as very weak or non-existent familial ties. This is the picture at micro-level that reproduces itself on a large scale, at macrocosmic level. It is a picture which shows a very sick society, a society that values violent sex and promiscuity among other social ills. Dr. Mutumbuka, at a reading by Marechera in Harare in 1984 gave an insightful assessment of the writer's work when he said:

"His work gives illuminating insights into the struggle for sanity in a situation full of contradictions where there was severe dislocation of moral and social norms which, for the young academic resulted in the fragmentation of family and community life and of ideals and vision, or to quote T. S. Eliot in *Wasteland*, 'a heap of broken images' (Zhuwarara, 1987: 116)." Also evident here and elsewhere, is the nihilism and existentialism, which are philosophies Marechera seems to subscribe to and which find expression in his works. Marechera's writing is full of especially non-African and European literary allusions. For example, the author is discussing his favorite subject of women when he says:

"William Blake's answer healed the wound for a time. Byron made it bleed; Wordsworth drove me into ascetic retreat. W. B. Yeats helped clarify the struggle...(Marechera, 1984: 122)." In 'The Black Insider', Cecero is described thus:

"He might have been something like Conrad's 'Nigger of the Narcissus' or Melville's multi-tattooed harpooner if that bowler hat and the toga had not recalled to me a picture of Caligula strutting through the decline and fall of Rome mouthing exterminations in Viennese accent...Bernard Shaw's 'Back to Methuselah' could explain a third of his overall effect on me...(Marechera, 1990: 47). The aforementioned style, which makes Marechera inaccessible to ordinary readers, can be understood by noting what the author said in 1983 in an article entitled 'Dambudzo Marechera interviews himself' in which he says: 'I did not see a book by a Black author until I was in Form 1'(Veit-Wild,1992:3). This means that he was exclusively fed on non-African literature up to form 1, a period when one is young and very impressionable. The

style, as exemplified previously, had become, at the time of his literary career, part of his psyche as a writer, some kind of a second nature to him. More examples include the title of his story 'Black Skin What Mask' which was influenced by Fanon's 1952 book Black Skin, White Masks in which he talks about racism, self denial of the colonised and acculturation due to an inferiority complex which inculcates a feeling of inadequacy on the part of the colonised and a yearning for the master's 'better' ways. Marechera's story's title 'Are People Living There?' takes its title from Athol Fugard's play 'People Are Living Up There' which, like the former, is also about the fantasy world of the poor (Jones, 1983). The theatrical episode in 'The Black Insider', which satirizes the 1978 Rhodesian internal settlement, eludes to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar Act I Scene II lines 220 to 227. Ian Smith's words to the Bishop (Abel Muzorewa) are similar to those used by Julius Caesar to warn his confidant, Mark Antony against Cassius:

"Look at Marota (Byron Hove). If I could I would avoid that man. He reads too much. He is a great observer, and he looks quite through the deeds of men...He loves no plays as you do, Reverend Bishop. He hears no music; seldom smiles, and smiles in such a sort as if he mocked himself and scorned his spirit that could be moved to smile at anything... (Marechera, 1990: 40)."

Finally, the story 'The Black Insider', for instance, adopts the plot of a plague outside and story-tellers inside from Geoffrey Chaucer. The use of on-African models/allusions/imagery, as amply illustrated here, which, as said earlier, had become second nature to the writer in question, helps to emphasize the writer's alienation from his Africanness which was largely brought about by the kind of education he received as Peter tells his mother about the unnamed protagonist in 'House of Hunger', who should be seen as representing Marechera himself and those in similar circumstances:

"All you did was starve yourself to send this shit to school while Smith made sure that the kind of education he got is exactly what he made him like this...(Marechera, 1978: 9)."



In fact, the self interview already alluded to, Marechera revealed that it never occurred to him to write in his mother tongue (Shona) which he viewed as part of the ghetto daemon he was trying to run away from. This fact further gives testimony to the alienation the artist suffered and which is so evident in his works. To Marechera, writing gave him an opportunity to escape from the stark reality of poverty and brutality that was rife in his surroundings and that escape also seems to have included the escape from that which was African. For instance, the author says “in ‘Mindblast’: ‘I felt no group sense and no group context with all those around me” (Marechera, 1984: 120). Through his writing, the author ‘exorcises religious guilt from (his) missionary school background’ (Marechera, 1984: 122) which tended to suppress human sexuality the same way Victorian society did to Sigmund Freud, the architect of psychoanalysis. As a result the reader finds lots of sexual references and images, usually perverted, in Marechera’s writing. For instance, he describes the hostilities between different countries or groups of people thus: ‘South Africa fucking Maseru; or the Israelis sodomizing the Palestinians in Beirut; or the Nazis screwing the shit out of the rest of Europe...’ (Marechera, 1984: 153). The previously repressed sexual feelings find an outlet in the writings of the missionary schooled author (Marechera did his secondary school at St. Augustine’s and while at Oxford University he felt that they were being trained to lead a very superficial life which tended to suppress self-expression and individuality in the name of Christian principles and set rigid ethics). When the author uses Christian/Biblical allusions/imagery, therefore, it is generally in a bad light. For example, when the narrator talks about his father and other men in the ghetto he says:

“He used to whore around too, like every other husband in sight. I would see a solemn congregation of husbands gathered together to receive the precious Christian wine called penicillin ...(Marechera, 1984: 130).” In this situation, the author points out that it was normal for husbands to ‘whore around’, a vice condemned by the Christian faith but he goes on to describe the adulterous husbands as a ‘congregation’, a term normally used to refer to a Christian gathering. For Holy Communion, the ‘congregation’ receives penicillin which in

actual fact is a cure for certain sexually transmitted diseases. The juxtaposing of the secular and the sacrosanct is meant to make the reader uneasy and to make him/her reflect more deeply on the issues raised. It is also meant to demystify religion as well as mock the holier-than-thou air often assumed by some religious people. As one critic observed: "Marechera's writing disturbs the mind, it disrupts realities and patterns of thought so often taken for granted" (Veit-Wild and Schade (Eds), 1988: 29). "Night on my Harmonica" is about the author living among London's poor 'of mostly squatters, dossers, derelicts, single parents who had given up. These now were my people...' (Marechera, 1990: 127). The story centers on his abuse of alcohol (an attempt to escape from the harsh realities of daily existence. The narrator, who should be seen as the author himself, who is not in full control of his life maltreats his white-girlfriend, Patricia. 'White', especially to an exile from white- dominated Rhodesia like Marechera, means affluence and high status in one sense. This is why almost thirty years after independence expressions like 'murungu wangu' (Shona) and 'ikhiwa lami' (Ndebele) which literally mean 'my whiteman/woman' when referring to one's employer or to one who has hired one to do some job, still exist. As a result, a black man like Marechera whose psyche, as a representative of black people, has been assaulted for centuries consciously or unconsciously yearns to 'acquire' a white girlfriend, a form of what Freud calls identification. "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" also deals with the same theme. Malcolm X drops Laura, his black girlfriend, for Sophia, a white one in order to improve his social standing. Malcolm X says:

"...in my black ghetto in America, to have a white woman...was for the average black man, at least, a status symbol of the first order...(Haley and Malcolm, 1964: 67)." The same can be said about the black narrator in 'House of Hunger'. The other sense of 'white' to the same exile means imperialist/oppressor/conqueror that need to be fought against. As a result of this 'need', we find the narrator in 'Night on my Harmonica' abusing his white- girlfriend, a form of Freudian displacement: There is diversion of repressed emotional feelings (anger) from the powerful oppressor, the white regime in distant Rhodesia to a new and weaker target, the white- girlfriend. In fact the narrator 'acknowledges' this when he says:

“Was all this going on because of sex? Because she was white and I was piling up humiliations on her as revenge for all the years I spent under Ian Smith’s boot? Was I sadist? or was I in some mad pursuit after the vain and complete possession? (Marechera, 1990: 127).” These incidents also reveal Marechera’s confessed failure in his relations with females. He says in ‘The Black Insider’:

I had never ‘understood’ women and I am never likely to... I cannot even say I know anything about my feelings for particular women. I usually close the subject to myself by saying that I do not want to know...(Marechera, 1990: 51). There is a multiplicity of failed man-woman relationships in the three books under scrutiny. Even the relationship with Patricia, the physically challenged girl in ‘House of Hunger’ fails to continue in a less restrained society like Britain as reported in ;The Black Insider; (pages 59 to 60). Marechera’s problems with women can be attributed to his very poor relations with his own mother. This claim can be substantiated by his refusal to meet her upon his return in 1982. She came to the University of Zimbabwe accompanied by Florence, the author’s young sister. There she met Bonus Zimunya who telephoned Marechera who, incensed, shouted furiously before hanging up:

“Who?... What does she want from me, the bitch? Tell her that I do not want to see her!’ ...(Veit-Wild, 1992: 310)”. She only managed to see him five years later on his deathbed.

According to Sigmund Freud, the architect of psychoanalysis, a male human offspring has to have a healthy relationship with its mother (the result of the Oedipus Complex) in order to have sound and lasting relations with members of the opposite sex. Marechera certainly did not have this with his mother and this explains numerous break ups ‘he’ had with his girlfriends in his works of art. The contradictions and paradoxes that are so prevalent in his works help to show the disturbance and desolation deep in his mind, which are a reflection of the troubled universe he lived in. His writing gives him an opportunity to vent all the bottled up emotions, a phenomenon which parallels Freud’s ‘talking out’ cure for neurotic patients. Marechera’s works,

especially 'The Black Insider', have been described by some critics such as John Wylie as lacking context and being unstructured. Some works, for example 'Grimknife Jr's Story' and 'The Black Insider' seem to be divorced from the concrete world of reality which some have attributed to his life in exile, which further and further alienated him from his roots. A Heinemann editor, James Currey, for instance, described 'The Black Insider' in terms of structure as a 'mess' (Veit- Wild, 1992: 9). Apart from the writer's quest to express his artistic uniqueness, which he felt, was at the verge of extinction due to so-called 'experts', the style also reflects on the artist's state of mind during writing. His life was in a mess and his mind in turmoil and his writing in terms of content and form naturally mirrored this. Stylistically, Marechera's narratives such as 'House of Hunger', 'The Black Insider' and 'The Sound of Snapping Wires' have no beginning, middle or end. They read like chunks taken from larger wholes. This helps to show that the life depicted in the stories is just but a glance of what ghetto life for the marginalized is all about. Having a beginning, middle and conclusion would create a false impression that there is an end to the violence, brutality, hunger, filth and general social malaise in the life depicted. Such compartmentalizing of works of art creates an impression that the artist concerned is more concerned with 'symmetry' than with the honest portrayal of stark reality. Furthermore, the stories are not meant to reassure the reader, they are simply unconventional just as their creator was. Most of Marechera's characters are described at the level of psychological realism rather than on social and physical realism. He is more interested in what is in their minds as they do whatever they are preoccupied with rather than focusing on their appearance. The style gives the author the opportunity to gain access to his characters' unconscious levels of awareness. Dwelling on the physical would limit the author to the conscious and subconscious. His character portrayal enables him to depict the impact, on his characters' psyches, of the dehumanizing experiences of the colonized, the exiled and those living at the fringe of mainstream society. As Zhuwarara (1987: 133) notes, Marechera's strength lies, among other things, 'in his unrivalled depiction of characters whose impulses and psyche have been perverted in a fundamentally irredeemable way...'

## CONCLUSION

This paper sought to give a psychoanalytic interpretation of selected aspects of the style of the author in the books 'House of Hunger', 'The Black Insider' and 'Mindblast'. The argument of the treatment of style is that it is through selection and interweaving of words that the writer consciously or unconsciously gives away what is buried in his/her unconscious. The environments in which Marechera grew up and found himself in later in life imprinted lasting impressions on his psyche and eventually the products he created. At a Press Conference in Berlin in 1979, Marechera gave an insight into the process of creation of works of art by artists in similar circumstances when he said that 'the creativity which has produced African Literature arises from the harshness, the brutality, the sheer murderousness of our own everyday experiences...' (Veit-Wild, 1992: 275). The aforementioned conditions created individuals who were angry but whose anger both at familial and national levels was mercilessly stifled only to find expression in works of fiction, which are presented as fictionalized autobiographies.

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