

The myth of Dambudzo marechera and radical politics in Zimbabwe

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Dambudzo Marechera's writings are central to an understanding of Zimbabwe's turbulent history. And often he is systematically dismissed. Why this is so suggests something of the dimensions of Marechera's intellectual achievement and the character of the uncomfortable questions he raises. Marechera's analysis of Zimbabwe's postcolonial self-image is thorough and devastating. His iconoclastic, dense style expressed the psychological fragmentation prevalent in Africa during the 70s and 80s and challenged the fundamental beliefs of both the nationalist and post-independence eras. His first book, *The House of Hunger* (1978), is now considered as a Zimbabwean classic.

The writer's childhood was shaped by conditions of squalor and violence as well as fear and oppression and offers a site that constitutes and defines resistance. For Marechera this sense of physical and spiritual starvation became his metaphorical "house of hunger," and its psychological impact was permanent. From early on, reading and writing provided his only means of escape. So, enduring is Dambudzo Marechera's reputation as an 'anarchist' writer and thinker because of the author's sense of futility in everything. In his world, nothing can succeed and the only constant and exception is change itself. His vision is penetrating and his critiques show an open-endedness that negates closure and anticipates change. He refuses to idolize and gratify national discourses and ideologies and instead fractures them and shows the temporariness of the values that underline them. Thus, Marechera in his anarchic vision does not seek to teach but rather to provoke, shock and subvert.

The House of Hunger illustrates the devastating effects of growing up black in colonial Rhodesia. The liberation struggle waged in the 1960s and 70s is the larger context in which the narrative is situated. Marechera demonstrates that the mindless brutality of colonialism was itself a form of madness that gave rise to double alienation: of a people and of the individual. To Marechera, it seems, having reached a point of psychological disequilibrium, the way forward is via an interrogation and understanding of the current

situation. This is, at once, the strength of *The House of Hunger*. In its fragmentary nature, the writer is advocating a redirection, a channelling of energy not necessarily into the pursuit of freedom but the pursuit of self-understanding and self-knowledge, to build a “new” individual capable of surviving in a “new” society. The anticipation of a “new” society was real and urgent as the book was composed during the turbulent years just before the Lancaster House Conference that eventually paved the way for Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980. As Robert Muponde (2015: 22-23) explains, ‘the multifarious contradictions and dynamics of his work provide a counterpoint to the nationalist discourse and its inflexible brand of history and resistance.’

Marechera’s reception in Zimbabwe was not always welcoming. The writer was accused of not contributing to the nation-building project. He did not agree with the politically instrumental view that literature must serve the revolution and its leaders. He is the only writer who articulated the black rage of the deceived *povo* in a manner unprecedented in Zimbabwean literature. His style of communicating this rage bespoke of a boiling urgency and an audacious sincerity. Marechera was a chronicler of rage because of his great love for his people. His love was neither abstract nor ephemeral. It was a strong bond with a devalued people whose daily struggles he identified with. And the only way for him to reach the truth was by dismantling or stripping naked any kind of disguise, pose or attitudinizing. This is where Marechera’s political importance lies. He confronted the atrocities committed against his people in colonial Rhodesia, and more significantly he attacks falsity and pretence in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

The literary establishment dismissed his debut work *The House of Hunger* as a “sideshow” and reviled him for his “outlaw” ways. But Marechera was speaking to and for a postwar generation. He didn’t want Zimbabwe, the last British colony, to turn into another failed postcolonial state. His audience, then and now, comprised of the young, who cared little about hero-worshipping, but about racial equality and economic advancement. Never mind that their hero, Marechera, remained destitute for the rest of his life.

When *The House of Hunger* was published forty years ago there was no futuristic sensibility to the book. It captured a specific time and political milieu. Yet the book has long been regarded by Zimbabwe's "born-free" generation as prophetic. Zimbabwe, under the tenure of former president Robert Mugabe, became a literal "house of hunger" after the land occupations of 2000, which disrupted the country's once productive agricultural sector. The notion of Marechera's propheticity, researcher Anna-Leena Toivanen argues, stems from the critical position he adopted towards the post-independence regime. This is a point activist Takura Zhangazha elucidates when he says: Marechera wrote not for political reasons or to be politically correct or wrong. He wrote for generations so that they could come to terms with how Zimbabwe had evolved as a country. He was a rebel with a cause, he was a prophetic writer and sought to speak through his writings.

Since the turn of the millennium, *The House of Hunger* has become a basic text for Zimbabwean youth who found their country claustrophobic and oppressive. The book had anticipated these devastating consequences. Marechera considered fiction a "form of combat." There is no doubt that his work is complex, challenging—and uniquely potent. He was adopted as Patron Saint for The House of Hunger Poetry Slam, a platform that gave young Zimbabwean poets a chance to express themselves freely and explicitly.

The House of Hunger was supposedly written in three weeks in a tent pitched next to a river after the writer had been expelled from Oxford. After the expulsion, Marechera technically became an illegal immigrant in Great Britain. That he was down and out is not in question. His accounts of how he composed his early writings have been revealed to be an ingenious act of self-mythologizing. Yet the way that novella is so enduring—so impervious to shifting cultural winds—seems to indicate something about how successfully it articulates a very Zimbabwean restlessness.

Six months after *The House of Hunger* was published, Marechera traveled to Berlin in June 1979 without a passport to attend a cultural event. He got detained at the airport, and after some protest from the organizers, he was released and gave a rousing speech

announcing his arrival on the literary scene. At this point, he was an unknown 27-year-old writer with a newly published book that was only five months old and thanks to the reviews he received from Doris Lessing and Angela Carter the British literati took notice of the new talent coming out of Africa. In Berlin, Marechera first authored his own mythology, his theatrics earning him notice from the media, authors, and academics. At this gathering there were all the big names of African literature – Wole Soyinka, Ngugi, Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head, etc – and yet Marechera became the major focus. He gives a two-hour press conference where he positions himself as a ‘guerrilla writer’ persecuted for his views and political writings. Many of these writers had never heard of him. In an interview two years ago in Cape Town, Taban Lo Liyong, who was present at the festival remembered, ‘Marechera whom I considered to be my son, there he was, saying all the things the rest of us could not say for fear of losing our respectability and reputations. I was proud watching him articulate how I felt.’ After Berlin, Marechera’s international reputation was sealed. James Currey who was instrumental in publishing Marechera and had close encounters remarked, ‘Marechera was one of our greatest successes in the African Writers Series. He was also one of our greatest failures.’ The last part of his remark is an expression of his frustration with Marechera for refusing to be the writer Heinemann wanted him to be, or his refusal to write the ‘great Zimbabwean novel’ they were desperate for.

Marechera’s rebelliousness manifests at the 1979 Guardian Fiction Prize ceremony where he threw plates and cups at walls and chandeliers, partly a response to the way he had been packaged for a rich white audience whom he accused of celebrating him while his people were suffering and being killed by the Rhodesian forces. The original title of *The House of Hunger* was in fact *At the Head of the Stream*, an element nearly lost to history. His publisher, James Currey, didn’t think it was a sexy title that could sell the book. It is not that Marechera is ungrateful. His violent reaction comes from a genuine place that is offended by the double standards prize ceremonies bring especially to black writers. He is being celebrated for his subject matter – writing about an Africa of hunger and disease - than for his actual craftsmanship.

The European scholarship around Marechera, for there is no single book by a black African scholar on Marechera, misread, and misdiagnose the real import of Marechera's literary and intellectual contributions. And some of his reactions are expressions of that frustration. Marechera knew, for instance, that to live on another's terms was not the same as to live on his own terms. There is certain logic in these calculations. One sees it in the way he lived his life. He wrote not for those who already had their lives mapped out for them and nicely planned, but for fellow travellers on the road to nowhere. Thus, to some of the earlier critics, Marechera was a 'lost traveler' in the patriotic wilderness of nationalism that everybody else felt at home. Instead of change, he saw ignominious stasis. He writes, 'We will drive through to the independent countries where ... original thoughts veer and crash into ancient lamp posts' building 'new towns crowded with thousands of homeless unemployed whose dreams are rotting in the gutters' (*The House of Hunger*, 74, 79-80). Marechera's insights into the conditions prevailing in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe need to be reclaimed in the face of the superficial readings of his works that have emphasised on his autobiography rather than his critique of his society and the wider world.

Marechera's work derives from many places, from many different influences and cultures. Marechera clearly did not see his mission as 'writing back' to the imperial centre. He refused to vend a consumable cultural otherness. In fact, he places *The House of Hunger* in a global canon alienating himself from his African peers so much that according to Muponde (2015:126), he remained an outsider in the cultural politics attached to both the early stages of the history of the Zimbabwean literature in English and the political nationalism that the fiction by black writers like him were expected to contribute. Marechera's break from the mould is not taken lightly by his contemporaries. Early black fiction in Zimbabwe was predictably didactic, nationalistic in outlook in order to put 'us into historical perspective ... to restore national and human pride and dignity in the face of an aggressive colonial culture determined to ruin our national image of ourselves as worthy humans' (Zimunya 1982: 4-5). Marechera, instead used his voice

to challenge a canon he was trained in. His refusal to offer easy answers or present static identities, for his characters, or himself, infuriated a vast range of critics.

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The radical politics of Marechera manifests after his death in August 1987. There was a groundswell of emotion. A Trust established in his name becomes a focal point. Its post office box address in the suburb of Avondale is flooded with letters from across Zimbabwe from young people mourning the death of their icon and legend. These letter writers are young, mostly between the age of 18 and 30, some of whom had been comrades in the war of liberation but found themselves homeless, unemployed, outcasts and broken. Marechera who had been their megaphone, speaking truth to power, and advocating for their rights was gone. The letters are directed to Marechera himself. The Dambudzo Marechera Trust run by Flora Veit-Wild, Hugh Lewin and Nhamo Marechera needed to find a way to harness this energy or contain the pleas of anguish and as a result convened writing workshops which changed the literary landscape of Zimbabwe. Meeting these young people, there was clear recognition that key infrastructure needed to be established to facilitate or platform new writers. As a result Marechera's death resulted in the establishment of Budding Writers Association of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Women Writers, Tsotso Magazine and more significantly Baobab Books (which became the most successful publishing outfit in Zimbabwe). No individual has had such influence on Zimbabwean literature as Marechera, unlike his peers Stanley Nyamfukudza, Chenjrai Hove and Charles Mungoshi who were gatekeepers as editorial directors of College Press, Mambo Press and Zimbabwe publishing house, Marechera opened floodgates that allowed free expression and an outpouring of war literature in a manner unprecedented.

But his influence was not just limited to literary culture. Marechera, the student activist, inspired the student activism in the late 80s in Zimbabwe. This was at a time when Arthur Mutambara, Tendai Biti, Douglas Mwonozora were the student leaders at the University of Zimbabwe. They were not alone. Morgan Tsvangirai who rose to the helm

of the Trade Union in Zimbabwe in 1988 recognised Marechera's influence as a radical voice who spoke truth to power and embraced his role as provocateur. While all these elements are fragmented and looking up to Marechera, it is not until 1999 at the formation of the Movement of Democratic Change that all the radical forces that used Marechera's ideas came together to forge a strong fight against Mugabe's rule. Though Marechera is not directly credited or mentioned, he is a key ideological influence in his stance against Mugabe and the politics he represented. In 1978, two years shy of independence, Marechera heckles Mugabe at a gathering of Zimbabwean exiles at the Africa Center in London. He could see through the deceptive characters that were about to take over the reigns in independent Zimbabwe.