

Realism in the African Novel: the case of Sembéne Ousmane's
God's Bits of Wood, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and
Pepetela's *Mayombe*.

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in English Literary and Cultural Studies (by
coursework and mini-dissertation)

in the

School of Languages and Literature
University of Durban Westville

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr Jabulani Mkhize for his constant motivation and expert advice. His guidance has been invaluable.

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.

I wish to thank my friends and family for their encouragement, especially my late mom for always pushing me beyond my boundaries.

I am most grateful to my husband, Justin for his love, support, understanding and the many sacrifices he has made for me during the course of this research.

Finally, I acknowledge my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ – without whom I am nothing.

DECLARATION

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is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in
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CONTENTS

Abstract	p. i
Chapter One: Theoretical Propositions	p. 1
Chapter Two: Socialist Realism in <i>God's bits of Wood</i>	p. 12
Chapter Three: <i>Petals of Blood</i> : Socialist Art or Propaganda?	p. 34
Chapter Four: <i>Mayombe</i> : Realism in a Resistance Narrative	p. 51
Conclusion	p. 68
Bibliography	p. 74

ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to examine the use of realism in three African novels by different authors from different countries, which are set at different phases of independence. Sembéne Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, is set in Senegal and is a pre-independence novel. On the other hand, *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is a Kenyan post-independence novel. Pepetela's *Mayombe* is set in Angola during the resistance struggle. What these novels share, though, is the use of realism. It is the use of realism, I argue, that enables these authors to capture the political realities of their respective countries. However, each author's employment of realism remains unique.

The first chapter engages with the foundational theory of this study. Georg Lukács' argument on realism will be the point of reference. I attempt to illustrate certain observable characteristics of realism through the examination of this argument found in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1956). Lukács' notions on naturalism, critical realism and socialist realism will be closely examined. But, before that discussion, I will demonstrate the importance of realism in arriving at the "novel" form, which is distinguished from previous literature (for example literature of the Middle Ages).

Chapter Two establishes Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* as a socialist realist text. The possible influence of Zola's *Germinal* on *God's Bits of Wood* is examined. The argument being that certain elements of *Germinal* are resonated in *God's Bits of Wood*, yet they each still retain their uniqueness. Zola's naturalist style is also evident in Ousmane's novel. But it is in the area of ideology that the two novels differ. *God's Bits of Wood* is a working class novel that successfully employs socialist realism.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* is the subject of the third chapter. This chapter reflects on Ngugi's use of the socialist realist principles to convey the social and political climate of post-independence Kenya. However, his formulaic use of socialist realism is

questioned as it gives rise to a novel that reads as didactic. The Marxist ideology that informs this novel is altogether too obvious.

The fourth chapter is an examination of *Mayombe* by Pepetela. This is a very significant novel in regard to Angolan history. This novel successfully deals with the complexities of the resistance movement. The employment of realism is obvious, however, the kind of realism employed is difficult to categorize. The emotional and psychological trauma of war is illuminated. Although a socialist perspective is evident, a formulaic use of socialist realism is avoided. Pepetela seems to be more interested in engaging in discussion of issues surrounding independence, such as tribalism and power hunger.

It is then evident that these authors use realism to attain a simulacrum of reality.

However, it is the author's specific perspective that shapes the text that is produced.

CHAPTER ONE: Theoretical propositions

Realism is intimately linked to the novel form as we know it today. This fact is discussed in great detail in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). In this discussion, the use of 'realism' is established as "the most original feature of the novel form" (1957:11). Defoe, Fielding and Richardson are credited as the "founders" of this new form of writing that developed during the eighteenth century. The term 'novel' however, was only firmly established by the end of that century. The question remains: What were the particular characteristics of realism that gave the novel its distinction and set it apart from the prose fiction of the past? Herein lies our interest that is, the techniques of realism.

Realism is founded on the assumption that there exists a reality or truth, and that this (reality/truth) can be discovered through the individual sensory perception. This was a challenge to traditional literature that made use of plots from mythology, history, legend etc. The novel form's use of realism meant that the individual's experience was the focus. The writer had to "convey the impression of fidelity to human experience", so the plot was always original (Watt 1957:13). As opposed to "general human types", Watt asserts that the novel had characters that were individualized and their backgrounds were developed. These characters were such that they appeared as individuals who existed in the contemporary environment. Characters now had both a name and a surname. This individual could be located to a specific space and time. The approximation to reality was successful because of the use of a time scale:

the novel's closeness to the texture of daily experience directly depends upon its employment of a much more minutely discriminated time-scale than had previously been employed in narrative (Watt 1957:22).

This closeness to reality was also realized through the creation of the character's environment. All of these aspects were carried out using a prose style that was restricted to a descriptive and denotative use of the language.

Although the above-mentioned technical aspects of realism allowed the novel to transcend traditional literature in its ability to assume authenticity, this however, in no way implied an accurate representation of reality. Indeed Watt clarifies:

There are important differences in the degree to which different literary forms imitate reality; and the formal realism of the novel allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms (Watt 1957:32).

One is inclined to agree with such a statement since of all the literary forms available today, arguably, none achieves a closer simulacrum to reality than realism.

Despite the observable characteristics elucidated by Watt above, there is, however, no single core realist theory and therefore, no single concrete definition of the concept of realism exists. This has in turn led to the development of branches within the realist tradition developing. In his study of realism, Damian Grant demonstrates this by alphabetically naming the various “branches” of realism. These branches add up to 22 differing types, from critical realism to visionary realism (Grant 1970:1). These “branches” vary as each one conceives of reality in a particular way and tries to present, as best as it can, a simulacrum of it. All subscribe to a different type of “truth” and endeavour to characterize the literature on the basis of their own interpretation of what the inter-relation between reality and the imagination should be.

The Hungarian Marxist, Georg Lukács, endeavours to provide a comprehensive analysis of the attributes of realism in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1956). His argument entails contrasting realism to modernism as well as distinguishing it from naturalism, and finishes off by discussing the similarities and differences between critical realism and socialist realism. Whereas Lukács elicits a definition of socialist realism through comparison with critical realism, Katerina Clark (1981) opts for a definition through the examination of socialist realism’s “patristic texts” such as Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* (1907). Both arguments however, do not claim a comprehensive

definition. Lukács' argument is pertinent to this study as this Marxist approach sufficiently equips us with the tools necessary to analyse the realism in the three African novels, the authors of which share a predominantly socialist perspective. Obviously, the entire argument is not feasible with regard to the confines of this particular study, however pertinent points raised by Lukács provide a significant point of departure for the analysis of the three novels.

According to Lukács, the basic determinant of the style of a work of art is the ideology that underlies the work, that is, the writer's view of the world. One of the important aspects of this view is the author's conception of who/what man is. This conception determines both the content and the form of a work as the writer then attempts to reproduce this view of the world in his art. The realist school supports the traditional Aristotelian dictum that man is "*zoon politikoon*" – a social animal. This view is applicable to all great realist literature. In short, the character's "ontological being" cannot be separated from the social and historical environment in which it was created. This is a useful concept as it allows the author to create a new topology for each new phase in the evolution of a society (Lukács 1956:31-32). The opposite view holds true for the modernist writer as man is conceived of as a solitary, asocial being. Although realist literature may display solitariness, it is qualitatively different from that posited by modernists. The solitariness that realist literature engages in is one that is brought about by the character's own actions or particular circumstances and it is merely a phase/fragment in the life of a community as a whole. He quite plainly sums up: "In a word, their solitariness is a specific social fate, not a universal *condition humaine*" (Lukács 1956:20).

Since realism concerns itself with a truthful reflection of reality, one of the factors that must be emphasized is the "concrete" and "abstract" potentialities of human beings in extreme situations (Lukács 1956:23). Lukács explains, through illustration, that concrete potentiality is the "dialectic between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality" which is in contrast to abstract potentiality that lies entirely within subjectivity. The argument proceeds with Lukács asserting that it is "disastrous" to deny the distinction between the abstract and concrete

potentialities of characters, which is what modernism does (Lukács 1956:28). So, by inference, modernism would be a “disastrous” choice for the author.

Another aspect that modernism denies (to its detriment) is the “typical” (Lukács 1956:43). The fusion of the individual and the typical is the very essence of realist art. The tendency of modernism to concentrate upon the particular is comparable to the style of naturalism. Naturalism and modernism share a static approach to reality, which is a consequence of the lack of perspective. This conclusion is arrived at on the basis of Lukács’ analysis of naturalism:

These schools have in common a basically static approach to reality. This is closely related to their lack of perspective (1956:34).

In a similar vein, he then goes on to point out one of the main foundations of the ideology of modernism as the ‘static’ conception of reality:

In short: thus a static apprehension of reality in modernist literature is no passing fashion; it is rooted in the ideology of modernism (1956:35).

On several other occasions, Lukács draws upon the similarities of modernism and naturalism, and goes as far as describing modernist literature as having a “*naturalistic* character” (1956:34).

The relationship of naturalism to realism has more often than not been a point of confusion. Some posit that they are one and the same thing whilst others deem them inextricable parts of one another. This kind of confusion is attributed to the fact that both operate on the assumption that “art is in essence a mimetic, objective representation of outer reality” (Furst and Skrine 1971:8). Both realism and naturalism share the technique of rich descriptive detail. However, as Lukács rightly points out, a similarity of technique does not necessarily imply a similarity in ideology. As aforementioned, realists consider man as “*zoon politikon*”. This is in contrast to the naturalist perception, which is that man is just an animal at the mercy of the environment:

So to the naturalists man is an animal whose course is determined by his heredity, by the effect of his environment and by the pressures of the moment (Furst and Skrine 1971:18).

This, however, is not the only distinction between realism and naturalism. If one were to further investigate the descriptive techniques, one would find that a difference does exist. This difference lies in “naturalism’s lack of a hierarchy of significance” when it comes to descriptive detail. Naturalism exhibits the failure to distinguish between significant and irrelevant information, whereas for realists, descriptive detail, forms part of the wider context (Lukács 1956:51). It follows, then, if a realist work contains irrelevant detail it may slip into the arbitrary naturalist category.

Within the category of realism there exists (as previously mentioned) many branches. Two of these branches (critical realism and socialist realism) are compared and contrasted in Lukács’ argument. A fundamental difference between the two is the use of a socialist perspective in socialist realism. This does not mean, however, that critical realism is incapable of dealing with socialism. Lukács observes that the acceptance of socialism is wholly possible within the critical realist framework. However, in that case, socialism will be dealt with from the “outside”. The converse holds true for socialist realism. Socialist realism is able to give an inside view of the forces working towards socialism because it is based on a concrete socialist perspective (Lukács 1956:93).

This concrete socialist perspective provides a framework for revealing both the psychological and moral make-up of characters it portrays (Lukács 1956:96). Within critical realism, although a character may be striving toward socialism, the portrayal of such a character remains no more than a superficial one.

The socialist perspective is also linked to the comprehensiveness attained by socialist realism with regard to the depiction of life. One of the main aims of socialist realism is the portrayal of the totality of society. Lukács is quick to assert, though, that he does not mean totality in the crude sense of the word (1956:99). While critical realism also strives toward totality, for both types of realism, this ideal of totality can never be more than a guiding principle (Lukács 1956:100). Where critical realism and socialist realism differ is the latter's commitment to the achievement of totality. Admittedly, this argument sounds hollow as one's "commitment" is abstract and, therefore, cannot be quantified.

Lukács' theory of realism has, however, been challenged, and one of the people who has challenged him is Bertolt Brecht. He is highly critical of the way Lukács arrives at the definition of realism:

In no circumstances can the necessary guide-lines for a practical definition of realism be derived from literary works alone. (Be like Tolstoy – but without his weakness! Be like Balzac – only up-to-date!) Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such – as a matter of general human interest (1977:76).

Brecht argues that, although Lukács' essays have valuable material, they are "unsatisfying" (1977:68). What Brecht suggests as a possible remedy is to engage in a method that would entail making works intelligible for the time in which they are written (1977:85). However, with this type of argument, Brecht is equally abstract by proposing to make works "intelligible" for the present day. Analysing a work as intelligible or not is a very subjective task and could also be put down to "loose talk". Ultimately, the bone of contention in their argument is that Brecht embraces modernism, which Lukács rejects (as has been shown).

Ernst Fischer rightly observes that, although the "antithesis" between critical realism and socialist realism may be an over-simplification, it does imply "an essential truth" (1959:110).

This is observable in Lukács' argument, where he points out that the difference between critical realism and socialist realism is the focus of each type. Each concentrates on a specific side of the character of class struggles. Critical realism tends to focus more on the nationalist characteristics of the class struggle, whereas socialist realism focuses more on the social nature of the struggle. Both, according to Lukács, are important, and, if allied, would produce a holistic picture of the nature of the class struggle:

This is important because many socialist realists neglect the national character of class struggles, stressing only their social nature. Since critical realism tends to concentrate on these aspects- somewhat one-sidedly -it may prove a valuable ally, contributing new insights and correcting the no less one-sided approach of socialist realism (1956:110).

In his approach to critical realism, Lukács' analysis is much more favourable than either his comments on modernism or naturalism. This is due to his view of critical realism being able to show the reactions of non-socialists to a changing society. This is a great asset to capturing the overall complexity of such a society. Clearly, when it comes to the bourgeois writer, Lukács seems to think that "fruitful" critical realism is a better choice than modernism (1956:92).

Another area of difference between critical realism and socialist realism is the use of the *Bildungsroman* formula:

It is striking that both bourgeois and socialist literature have shown a preference for the autobiographical *Bildungsroman* (Lukács 1956:111).

This arises out of both types portraying society in flux, which leaves the individual with the dilemma of carving out a place for himself by overcoming a variety of obstacles. Within bourgeois literature, a rebellious hero is portrayed and his individual struggles within society are examined up until early adulthood. This hero may or may not be reconciled to society and often ends up in isolation. Socialist literature starts off where bourgeois literature ends because the "hero's" childhood is negligible. It is the development of the young adult into a conscientized

leader that is the focus. This is the result of the emphasis of socialist realism on ‘true consciousness’ (Lukács 1956:100). In essence, socialist realism takes the development of the individual a step further by monitoring the individual’s progress from isolation to a greater participation with the new social forces (Lukács 1956:113).

Socialist realism makes use of the “positive hero”. He is different from his predecessor in earlier literary forms. Some of these differences are highlighted above. The positive hero starts off as a somewhat naïve person. He is then brought to enlightenment by a “mentor” in his life and his consciousness is subsequently raised. He is someone that is meant to be emulated. This coming of age is a major theme in many socialist realist texts:

...a relatively naïve person is brought to see the light by some emissary of the new enlightenment. The stages of the conversion process often structured an entire work of fiction, and the two actors in this process were usually identified explicitly as “mentor” and “disciple”...(Clark 1981:49).

As aforementioned, Maxim Gorky’s text, *Mother*, played an integral role in shaping our expectations of a socialist realist novel. This is directly related to the fact that the plot formula that Gorky employed aptly signified historical progress (Clark 1981:65).

One of the ways Lukács firmly establishes socialist realism as a better style is by using words such as “graduating”, to describe a writer moving from critical realism to socialist realism. This conclusion is foreshadowed earlier on in the (seemingly) objective argument when the issue of comprehensiveness of reality was the focus:

A fuller understanding of the possibilities of human development, and of the laws underlying it, can form the basis of a new style – which in this sense, and only in this sense, will mark a higher stage in the development of art. Similarly, socialist perspective, correctly understood and applied, should enable the writer to depict life more

comprehensively than any preceding perspective, not excluding that of critical realism (Lukács 1956:98).

This statement is quite simply a negation of the statement that all works of art, regardless of when they arise in a society's development, are "aesthetically equivalent". It would follow that if a style were of a higher stage in the development of art, then it would also imply higher aesthetic value, for one cannot be separated from the other.

Socialist realism is able to give a comprehensive account of reality. This comprehensiveness is due to the use of typicality (Lukács 1956:122). There are, however, pitfalls when it comes to the concept of typicality. Certain writers, in an attempt to follow a formulaic version of socialist realism, may create characters for solely illustrative purposes. This is what Lukács deems "aesthetically disastrous" (1956:122). This concern is reiterated:

This is why the dogmatic, mechanical application of political concepts in art must be dangerously restrictive. Particularly so if dogmatism, as in the Stalinist period, distorts reality by its subjectivist approach and expects the artist to adopt its own arbitrary typology (Lukács 1956:124).

A socialist realist writer may also fall into the temptation of revolutionary romanticism. This is highly possible because of the anticipatory or optimistic character of socialist realism. There have been many debates on this particular issue of socialist realism:

Scholars still argue, for instance, as to how much "realism" and how much "romanticism" it should entail (Clark 1981:3).

Revolutionary romanticism results in a distortion of reality. The characters and the situations that are portrayed are not based on life - they are "abstract, bloodless, blurred" (Lukács 1956:130). By pointing out such distinctions between socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism, clearer defining features of the former are established. Ernst Fischer seems to have a probable

solution to this dilemma of what constitutes socialist realism. He prefers to concentrate on the attitude of the work, rather than on its style. If a text has a socialist outlook, he prefers to call it “socialist art”, instead of socialist realist (1959:107). Fischer goes on to elaborate:

...socialist art and literature as a whole imply the artist’s or writer’s fundamental agreement with the aims of the working class and the emerging socialist world (1959:108).

The First All-Union Congress of Soviet writers, held in 1934, yielded a rather broad but well summed-up definition of socialist realism:

Socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism (Tertz 1960:24).

Admittedly, the greatest bug-bear of this study is using Soviet socialist perspective in relation to African literature. However, when one considers the wave of socialism that has swept over Africa and has led to many countries gaining their independence as a result, it is not surprising that socialism has affected literature as well. After all, literature does provide valuable insights into the particular characteristics of a nation engaged in decisive class struggle - almost as much insight, according to Lukács, as Marxist historiography (1956:109-110). On the other hand, the effect of literature on a society cannot be underestimated, especially with regard to realist works:

Born of reality, it acts back upon reality...A discussion about the characters and situation in a novel stirs up decisive problems of social life and philosophy. Art and the discussion of art are a forward-thrusting part of life in the socialist world (Fischer 1959:207).

What I intend to do is to try and evaluate these novels using the broader aspects of socialist realism within the specific space and time that they were written in, as opposed to a wholesale importation of Soviet Socialist realism. This kind of approach is supported by Clark, who asserts that in the endeavour to define socialist realism, no universal definition can be achieved:

What is Socialist realism? It is not, first of all, a single doctrine. We now recognize that the old bogey, “monolithic communism”, does not exist – that there are, instead, many different communisms. In much the same way, there are many different Socialist Realisms. Different countries, different political parties, and critics with different *partis pris* have each evolved different definitions of it (1981:3).

CHAPTER TWO: Socialist Realism in *God's Bits of Wood*.

“What I want to represent is a social realism.” – Sembéne Ousmane (Schipper 1989:139).

In the light of the above statement, there can be no ambiguity about the stance of one of Francophone Africa's greatest writers, Sembéne Ousmane. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to ascertain whether Ousmane, in fact, succeeds in his goal of representing “social realism” in his novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1960). Ousmane's status, as one of the great writers of the African continent, was established with the publishing of his “masterpiece”, *God's Bits of Wood* (Palmer 1973:5). This novel is a fictionalization of an historical event, the railway worker's strike along the Dakar-Niger line. The novel captures the harsh conditions that the strikers and their families had to endure in their quest for better working conditions. The story rotates around three places Bamako, Thiès and Dakar.

Historically, (according to Joyce Moss), African workers along the Dakar-Niger railway line began a strike on 10 October 1947. Their discontentment sprang out of certain economic and social changes that occurred in the years during and after World War II. Multiple factors in the 1940's gave rise to a class of urban African wage earners, who became militant in the post-war era. The dismal failure of their earnings to keep up with inflation helped to bring birth to African activism. They expected their lives to change after the war, with regards to education and discriminatory treatment from employers. However, they were disillusioned. The African trade unions had a significant role in the strikes of the 1940's (Moss 2000:183-184). This particular strike ended on 19 March 1948.

The novel captures how this strike affected the lives of the different communities that were actively involved in the strike. That it was meant to be a story about communal life, is quite evident from the beginning of the narrative. The novel opens with a scene of the gathering of women in a little community in Bamako. It is here that old Niakoro is introduced. She is preoccupied with the impending strike of the railroad workers. The older generation, in general,

is against the strike, while the younger generation sees it as a necessity in regaining their rights. As the story progresses, however, the community (both young and old) is forced to admit that the strike is a fitting reaction to the unfair treatment by the colonial authorities. The communities go through a certain degree of “enlightenment” most of which is inspired by the teaching of Bakayoko. After each attempt by the railroad bosses to pressure the workers to give in, these communities of people actually become more resilient. The women in the novel play such a vital role in actually making the authorities acknowledge the need for change in the working conditions. The march of the women is actually a profound statement of their strength and courage. The novel ends with the strike giving way to a general workers’ strike, which ends in just 10 days.

Eileen Julien points out Ousmane’s acknowledgement of Western influence on his writing of this novel. She asserts: “In any discussion of literary origins or intertextuality, *Les Bouts de bois* is inevitably associated with Zola’s *Germinal*...” (Julien 1992:69). Emile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) was also patterned after an actual historical strike – the Anzin strike of 1884. The novel received substance from the social, political and economic climate of France:

Perhaps no novel in the “Rougon-Macquart” series was more contingent upon current events, political, economic, social and literary attitudes than *Germinal* (1884-1885) (Zakarian 1972:14).

The novel is set at a time of great economic stress in France, especially for the coal industry that had to reduce staff numbers considerably. A strike was inevitable as it was the proletariat that suffered the most from this economic crisis. Although the stockholders did suffer financially, their wealth ensured the continuation of their opulent lifestyles.

Aside from both novels’ fictionalization of historical strikes, there are a number of striking similarities between them, such as certain characters. The shopkeepers in both the stories are equally heartless. Hadramé, in *God’s Bits of Wood*, is depicted as a greedy individual who tries

to make as much money as possible by cramming tailors into his shop. Ramatoulaye begs for food, but he flatly refuses, explaining that the company would close his shop if he gave her food without her paying for it (Ousmane 1960:42). This scene is paralleled to the scene in *Germinal* where Maheude goes to Maigrat's shop for credit and is also flatly refused. He was also under the company's power (1885:94). However, Maheude does go back and Maigrat concedes to giving her food on the understanding that Maheude's daughter, Catherine, would come to ask for groceries. By implication, he wanted to exchange food for sex.

In *Germinal*, Jeanlin is physically impaired by an accident in the mine and when he recovers, he is able only to limp. This gives him a chance to loaf about with his friends, Lydie and Bébert. They content themselves by playing childish games at first, then they resort to stealing:

The little devils had become the terror of the neighbourhood, which they had progressively ravaged like a horde of barbarians (1885:257).

Jeanlin is very selfish and does not share the bounty with their starving families, unlike the way the "apprentices" in *God's Bits of Wood* who shared their food with their families. This group of "apprentices" was much larger than Jeanlin's group. They also loaf about in their free time at first. They then begin to hunt for food and even rob Aziz the Syrian's shop. The "apprentices" are led by Magatte. One night this group begins target practice on the light bulbs of the station and two of them are shot dead. Bébert and Lydie are also shot in a clash with the soldiers (1885:409).

Ad'jibid'ji, in *God's Bits of Wood*, is comparable to Alzire in *Germinal*. Both are incredibly intelligent for their age. They have certain adult attributes. For instance, Ad'jibid'ji understands philosophical issues such as the purity of the human spirit (1960: 237). Alzire takes on adult responsibilities such as taking care of her baby sister and carrying out other adult chores. This nine-year old looks like a "pretty little housewife" (1885:110). Through these and other examples, we can see the impact of *Germinal* on the characterization of Ousmane's novel. Even

though certain ideas from *Germinal* are used, *God's Bits of Wood* still retains a sense of originality, as Ousmane makes those ideas his own and ensures that his novel is rooted in the social reality of Senegal. This becomes more apparent when we consider other aspects of the novel, later on in this chapter, such as the “hero”, the denouement of the novel as well as the descriptive style.

Germinal is a novel about the proletariat, of which Zola was not a part. The novel serves as a good example of what Lukács is referring to when he talks about writing about the working class from the outside. For his material, he relied heavily on observation, interviews and newspaper articles. About this Zakarian observes that:

The miracle lies in Zola's ability to give order, organization and an illusion of truth to facts gathered from so many diverse sources and to present a unified and credible fiction of the artistic and historical merits of *Germinal* (Zakarian 1972:186).

It follows, then, that even though *Germinal* is well researched and historically accurate, Zola could not go deeper than the mere chronicling of events as he had no personal experience of the class he explored.

On the other hand, the depth of *God's Bits of Wood* can largely be attributed to the writer's “roots” in the working class. Ousmane, who hails from Senegal, has had an unusual history for a writer. His was not the typical middle-class university education received by most African intellectuals. Mineke Schipper comments:

Sembéne Ousmane is mostly an autodidact...he has not been very much influenced by the “intellectual milieus in France” as were most Francophone African writers with a university education (1989:143).

Ousmane, is a self-taught writer, who taught himself to read, write and speak French. He then proceeded through many diverse careers: he was a fisherman, bricklayer, mechanic, dock worker in Marseilles, plumber as well as a trade union leader. For this reason, he is one writer who may claim to have the “inside” perspective when writing about the working class. His perspective has not been influenced by classical French education. Eustace Palmer asserts that Ousmane’s achievements are as a result of his honest exertions, rather than through being exposed to classical French education, which would have led him to a middle-class lifestyle (1973:3). Thus, his novels are an embodiment of a working class perspective presented through realism. Ousmane states:

The idea of my work derives from this teaching: to keep as close as possible to reality and the people (Schipper 1989:136).

It is with this statement in our minds that we, with Schipper, ask how close to the people and to reality *God’s Bits of Wood* is.

The novel, *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, was written in 1960 and only translated into English in 1970 as *God’s Bits of Wood*. From these dates, we can see that the novel was written in retrospect. Thus, the actual historical strike of 1947-48 and the strike of *God’s Bits of Wood* are different because Ousmane was writing with hindsight. The actual railroad workers could not have predicted that their strike was significant in heralding independence more than a decade later. Although the novel is modelled after that historical strike, this does not imply that it is historically accurate. However, *God’s Bits of Wood* is an essential way of giving names to all those who suffered for a minor triumph in history over the colonialists. It can be seen as personalizing history. An alternate way of perceiving the novel would be that Ousmane used the historical events to create a realistic novel. Since reality is effected through authentic historical events:

The authenticity of history emphasizes indeed the effect of reality on the reader: this is how it went, the author seems to say, on the general and the personal level – let there be no doubt about it (Schipper 1989:138).

The recounting of history becomes a useful literary tool in the production of the novel. This is, in fact, a major indicator that *God's Bits of Wood* is a realist text.

The Aristotelian concept of man as a social being is closely adhered to in *God's Bits of Wood*. Lukács argues this dictum is applicable to all great realistic literature (1956:19). The focus of the novel is on society, rather than on the individual, and this, together with the characteristics of folklore, make it an Afro-centric novel. For example, there are multiple sub-plots in motion making it difficult to portray a main character, as in the case of Western forms of novels. This novel concentrates on a community of people:

This approach not only agrees with the idea of African communalism, but reflects socialist ideology, which focuses on people rather than individuals (Ngara 1985:72).

Thus, there is a marriage of Western and African styles, in *God's Bits of Wood* that is successfully carried out. Both styles surprisingly, add to the uninterrupted flowing structure of the novel. This harmony is obtained because the principles are similar. However, the most obvious difference between the two styles is that the Western forms have a distinct hero, whereas this novel does not, although it does have an ideological leader in the form of Bakayoko (Ngara 1985:72).

The chief protagonist in *Germinal* is Étienne Lantier. The novel tracks his experience as he arrives in Montsou as a mechanic and eventually finds work as a coal-miner. Through much reading and conversations with Rasseneur, the pub owner, and, more especially, Souvarine, a young Russian anarchist, he is inspired to adapt a socialist outlook. He also corresponds with Pluchart, who is deeply informed and involved in the socialist movement. These ideas begin to

transform him and he eventually sets up a provident fund for the workers. His appearance also begins to change, as he becomes a leading figure in the village. His ideological development, however, is not sound:

When it came to ways and means he was vaguer, jumbling up his odd bits of reading; and with such an ignorant audience not hesitating to embark on explanations that he could not follow himself, into which he threw all the different systems tempered by his certain knowledge of an easy triumph, universal kiss of peace that would put an end to class misunderstandings (1885:168).

His oversimplification of complex matters such as the class conflict has a marked impact upon the mob that goes on a rampage later on in the novel. In a speech to the villagers, Étienne tastes the “heady wine of popularity” which encourages dreams of grandeur (1885:274). He becomes more involved in what he could become, he uses the people to further his own career. He is eventually rejected by the same people and is forced to go back to work in the mine. The novel ends with Étienne leaving Montsou a very humiliated individual. However, he does come to a realization that violence does not solve much and that legal methods would prove more effective. Even this dawning of realization is not convincing. Lukács cites Étienne as a failure of the critical realist to show an “inside” portrayal of his character (Lukács 1956:96).

Unlike Étienne, Bakayoko proves to be a more successful leader. The railroad workers win their strike in part because of good leadership. However, Bakayoko can barely be compared to the “hero” in a classic *Bildungsroman*. The comparison only goes so far as the hero achieving personal growth after going through certain experiences. His growth is certainly not the focal point of the novel, as the novel is not about him, although there are some aspects of his character that may warrant the label of “positive hero”. He is the most politically informed as well as eloquent leader that other members of the community look up to, despite his apparent social flaws. The novel lets readers know that he is the leader of the strike and that he is an influential person through other characters at the beginning of the novel. Beaugosse contemplates:

Who was this man whose shadow reached into every house, touching every object? His words and his ideas were everywhere, and even his name filled the air like an echo (1960:64).

In this way, Bakayoko is accorded a somewhat mysterious attribute in the text, thereby whetting the appetite of the reader to want to find out more about him. With regard to the “mentor-disciple” relationship of the socialist realist formula, we are not informed of any kind of naivety on his part, nor are we told of any mentor in his life. If anything, he is the mentor to many others. The aforementioned criteria are essential when establishing a character as a “positive hero” in the social realist sense. This apparent difficulty in tagging Bakayoko is as a result of Ousmane’s break away from the traditional socialist realist plot established in Gorky’s *Mother*.

God’s Bits of Wood is an innovative variation of the Nilovna-Pavel relationship of *Mother*. The positive hero in Ousmane’s novel has many faces. Bakayoko teaches the workers on an impersonal level. He is often portrayed as cold and aloof (even in personal relationships), as one unable to show emotion as exhibited in his treatment of his wife, Assitan. However, this apparent flaw in his personality, undergoes a change at the end that makes him seem a much better person:

But it was possible that the moral and material distress he had seen on every hand in the days of the strike had affected him more than he knew – had altered and matured him (1960:235).

His attitude toward Assitan is a gauge that measures his transformation. When the strike is finally over, Bakayoko seems to have received some enlightening other than the political, he becomes more family orientated and thus, more human. He develops with the strike. As the strikers eventually triumph, so too does he gain personal victory in terms of his development. Bakayoko, then, could be seen as the ideological mentor to the scores of workers and their families. It is the people that take on the “positive hero” role because, at different points of the novel, different characters assume this role. Some, like Nilovna in *Mother*, become martyrs and some live to see the triumph.

It is Penda who happens to be one such martyr. Penda is a prostitute. David Murphy describes Penda as “the most scandalous of Sembéne’s liberated women” (2000:148). She is, at first, quite nasty to Maimouna for being in her house but, then, she has a change of heart. She is quite incensed at Maimouna’s baby’s father for taking advantage of a blind woman. This creates a special bond between them. Her life as a prostitute leaves her with a deep sense of revulsion for men, yet she is one of their greatest assets in so far as organizing the march and the distribution of food is concerned. A point seems to be coming across, that the strike is not a male undertaking that would yield rewards for the males alone. It was a necessary step toward the uplifting of the entire community. Through her involvement in the strike, she begins to change from a social outcast to a courageous leader. She is even considered by the revered Bakayoko to have been good enough to be his second wife: “...Bakayoko felt very much alone, and he thought about Penda. He might have made her his second wife...”(1960:226). Penda does not get the opportunity to live out her renewed lifestyle. She dies quite tragically after being shot at the end of the march. *Germinal’s* immoral character, Mouquette, is also shot by soldiers. Her life of sexual promiscuity is “absolved” in her dying actions of flinging herself in front of Catherine and taking the bullet that was meant for her (1885:410). Mouquette, however, is not nearly as heroic as Penda. Moquette’s action’s are impulsive whereas, Penda gives her position much thought before she embarks on the march.

Change in perception is not unique to Penda alone. Almost everyone in the novel goes through some sort of change (some positive and some negative) as a result of the strike. The largely ignorant village people depicted at the beginning of the novel, are shown at the end of the novel as people whose consciousness has been raised. The problem arises around the issue of collective consciousness. Ousmane comes under scathing attack by Simon Gikandi, who sees this as one of the novel’s major shortcomings. He criticizes Ousmane for dramatizing the coming of the people to full consciousness through objective reality and, yet, still not attaining a collective “world vision”. He ends his argument by saying:

Ousmane seems to have a lot of faith in the ability of objective reality to yield a consciousness of its own (and of its own will); this consciousness, he assumes, can then

affect the reader's way of seeing the dramatized reality (and reading the text). His narrative certainly points a new way for both his characters and readers, but rarely are the latter invited to share the fate of the former. It is possible for the reader of *God's Bits of Wood* to exhibit the kind of aloofness, which the authorial narrator maintains for most of the novel (1987:126).

This is a highly contentious argument. Gikandi is rather prescriptive in his idea of a political novel. He assumes that the author needs to be explicit in "conveying the message". I would suggest that Ousmane's restraint at being didactic is not a weakness in the novel, but, rather, quite the opposite. It is this presentation of reality that makes the novel an aesthetic success. By presenting the fate of characters in an objective manner, Ousmane invites the reader to comment on it and, in so doing, becomes actively involved, as opposed to being told what to think. Rather than the superficial chronicling of a collective consciousness, Ousmane could be said to be delving into the complexities of developing social consciousness.

Consciousness is raised on different levels. The strike initiates a change in the mental outlook of the people's accepted practices and beliefs. Amuta (1989:138) describes several instances of this. For example, there is a change in the mode of production from agricultural to industrial:

When the smoke from the trains no longer drifted above the savannah, they realized that an age had ended – an age their elders had told them about, when all of Africa was just a garden for food. Now the machine ruled over their lands, and when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence (1960:32).

The people's understanding of gender roles is also drastically changed, especially with regard to how the men view the role of women. This strike creates circumstances that result in women becoming more pro-active, as opposed to previously looking to their men as leaders. Men have, therefore, to accept that the gender roles that they knew are slowly disappearing and they can no longer look at women through sexist eyes:

And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women (1960:34).

The men who were traditionally the providers are now incapacitated by the strike (that is, they cannot work and earn money to buy food), and the women are forced by the numerous mouths to feed to go out and find food. So there is a kind of role reversal, where the women become the providers.

The strike is instrumental in creating awareness in the older generation that, at the beginning of the novel, is quite resistant to the idea of a strike. At the beginning of the novel we are made aware that Niakoro, representative of the older generation, is displeased that the younger generation is engaging in this strike, because of her experience of the first one, which she describes as: “A terrible strike, a savage memory for those who had lived through it...”(1960:2). As the strike begins to gain momentum, this older generation begins to see the necessity of this action by the younger generation. They gain clarity of vision and begin to question the inequalities that they had accepted for so long as unchangeable. Bakary, a representative of the older generation, questions:

...And the fathers of the white men, the ones who taught us our trade – the Edouards and the Henris and the Delacollines – where are they? They are living at home again, and they have their pensions. Why should we not have this pension, too? That is what the young ones are asking (1960:18).

There is now clarity for the older generation as to why they should fight for certain basic rights like pensions. This raising of consciousness of both young and old generations results in a change in their perspective of the future. This, according to Lukács, is “true consciousness” (1963:100).

The characters also receive a certain degree of political consciousness by the end of the novel. Emmanuel Ngara (1985:62-3) points out that the strike takes on the characteristics of a class struggle where there is a “struggle between those who control the means of production and the exploited working class.” Certain characters are representative of the different classes; this is evident in the confrontation between Dejean, a bourgeois figure, and Lahbib, a member of the proletariat, where the latter responds to the former’s claim that by speaking to him in such a manner, Lahbib was insulting a great nation:

‘ *Monsieur le directeur,*’ Lahbib said, ‘you do not represent a nation or a people here, but simply a class. We represent another class, whose interests are not the same as yours. We are trying to find a common meeting ground and that is all.’ (1960:182).

Ngara (1985:63) goes on to explain that Lahbib is quite right in his argument by showing that the strikers are supported by comrades in other countries including “France itself” (1960:184). The above statement affirms Lahbib’s statement that Dejean and his associates are not representatives of a nation but, just another class. They are, in fact, the ruling class in this particular French colony. Ousmane’s portrayal of class is a dynamic one, as he links past, present and prospective future of the community of the railroad workers. This is in keeping with Lukács’s definition of class being a dynamic thing, containing within itself past, present and future of the society in question (1963:95).

Ousmane tells the story of the ongoing strike and concurrently recalls the issues of the past through flashbacks/streams of consciousness, alludes to the future through the ideology of his primary characters as well as use a positive ending. There can be no dispute that he avoids “vulgar sociology”. Character is not determined by one’s class in this novel. For example, a whore (Penda) is able to redeem herself and becomes a hero. A member of the new working class (Beaugosse) becomes a traitor and forsakes all his ideals for economic gain. One can view this as a conflict within both society and the individual. Because of these several levels of consciousness, the characters of *God’s Bits of Wood* realize that it is only they that can attain for themselves their rights as human beings. This is not expressed explicitly by any character or the narrator in the novel, but it is evident in the women’s march and the worker’s general strike

towards the end of the novel. This attribute of the novel earns its place in the realist domain (Davies 1984:127).

There is an element of naturalism that is present in the novel. Where *Germinal* and *God's Bits of Wood* are most similar, is in the area of descriptive detail. Zola is inextricably linked to naturalism, as it was he who coined the term (Fischer 1959:76). In true naturalist style, *Germinal* engages in lengthy technical discussions and unnecessary detail. This makes for very tedious reading:

It was striking eleven at the little brick church of Village Two Hundred and Forty, where Father Joire came over on Sundays to say Mass. You could hear the children's sing-song voices coming from the school next door, although the windows were shut to keep out the cold. The open spaces between the four long rows of uniform houses, divided into little gardens that backed on to each other, were all deserted. These gardens were devastated by winter, and their wretched marly soil was bare but for a few clumps of decaying vegetables. It was soup-making time, chimneys were smoking and every now and again, somewhere along the rows, a woman appeared, opened a door and disappeared again. Although it was not actually raining the heavy grey air was so damp that drain pipes dripped steadily into water butts standing all along cobbled pavements (1885:100).

Of course there are places where detailed description proves to be very effective, such as the destruction of the equipment at the pits (Part 5, Ch3).

At certain points in the novel, Ousmane tends to lean toward naturalism in his style in order to create a simulacrum of reality. One does not have to look far to find such an example:

The last rays of the sun filtered through a shredded lacework of clouds. To the west, waves of mist spun slowly away, and at the very center of the vast mauve and indigo arch of sky the great crimson orb grew steadily larger. The roofs, the thorny minarets of the

mosques, the trees – silk-cotton, flame, and mahogany – the walls, the cohered ground; all caught fire. Striking brutally through the cloud curtain, like the beam from some celestial projector, a single ray of light lashed at the Koulouba, the governor's residence, poised like a sugar castle on the heights that bore its name (1960:1).

There is, in this lengthy description a sense of naturalism, which is scattered throughout the novel. However, this sense of naturalism is not sufficient to place the text within the naturalist category. The novel is, equally balanced with what Ngara calls a “concrete style” (1985:67). Ngara points out that Ousmane's overall style is in the main, *concrete*, i.e. he tends to convey his message through the depiction of episode, character and dialogue rather than through the discussion of abstract ideas (1985:67).

An example of a message conveyed through the depiction of episode is the clash between the soldiers and the strikers at the marketplace:

The child screamed, and the man dropped the bicycle, which fell across the baby's body. At this moment Bachirou came running up, pursued by some militiamen. He cleared the bicycle with a single leap, but the heavy boots of the soldiers came down on the frame and the rear wheel, whose axle rested squarely on the child's head. With a little cry, like that of a wounded animal, the wailing stopped (1960:22-23).

With this short and emotive passage, Ousmane not only describes the intensity of the conflict between the soldiers and the strikers but, also, the inhumane treatment of the strikers and their families carried out by the authorities. This description is a picture of the harsh reality of colonialism, which was only able to sustain itself through the use of brute force.

This, however, does not mean that Ousmane does not go beyond description. Such a statement would be unfounded. Ousmane maintains a fine balance between “showing” and telling the reader. Yet, the theory to which he subscribes is merely a guiding principle. He is not didactic in

his style. Ngara (1985:67) points out, quite correctly, that Ousmane rises to great poetic heights, particularly in the closing paragraphs of his chapters. An example of this conceptual style is demonstrated when Ousmane describes the march of the women to Dakar. At the point of entry into the city, the soldiers try to prevent the women from entering:

And already the pressure of this human wall was forcing the soldiers to draw back. Reinforcements began to appear, from everywhere at once, but they were not for the men in uniform. A few rifle butts came up but were beaten down by clubs and stones. The unnerved soldiers hesitated, not knowing what to do, and then some shots rang out, and in the column two people fell – Penda and Samba N’Doulougou. But how could a handful of men in red tarbooshes prevent this great river from rolling on to the sea? (1960:202).

On the one hand, this is a powerful description of the women breaking through the barrier formed by the soldiers and, on the other, it is a figurative description that predicts the eventual triumph of the strikers over their employers. If one were to read further into this passage, one could also see it as signifying the inevitability of the end of capitalism and, possibly, the impending independence of the state.

Characterization is a vital element in establishing whether *God’s Bits Wood* is a social realist text. One of the essential attributes of socialist realism is a sympathetic portrayal of characters from among the oppressed (Amuta 1989:140). Despite Ousmane’s Marxist alignment, he resists the temptation of creating characters that are merely his “puppets”. This is observed by Palmer:

Seldom has a writer been able to generate such passion, anger and sympathy for the people’s sufferings while appearing detached and uninvolved. Ousmane never intrudes; we seldom hear him speaking in his own voice; everything is presented through the interaction of character, scene and setting (1973:6).

What contributes to the success of the novel, is Ousmane's ability to appear detached. At times, even when he is speaking, the reader does not get the sense of being preached to because he is skillful in generating those ideas through his characters within the context of a certain scene:

A long time ago...everything that happened within a framework...Today that framework no longer exists...I think that it is the machine which has ground everything together this way and brought everything to a single level. Ibrahim Bakayoko said to me, not long ago: "When we have succeeded in stirring up the people of this country, and making them one, we will go on and do the same thing between ourselves and the people on the other side of the ocean." How all this will come about I do not know, but we can see it happening already, before our eyes (1960:94).

This is a passage in which Fa Keïta speaks at the trial of Diara, the traitor. They are about to decide on what punishment to give Diara when Fa Keïta begins to explain how things were before "the machine" came. He speaks about the tribal divisions and an old system that must now be dispelled if they were to make progress. He goes on to the next page speaking about living as brothers and everything being equal. His views are very much those of the author i.e. they are socialist in nature and very optimistic.

Ousmane uses an array of characters whose development is seen through certain scenes and its setting. Because there are so many characters, there are some peripheral characters that cannot be fully developed. These characters are seen by Ngara as "flat" characters that stand for types like Lahbib, Ramatoulaye, Sounkare and Doudou (1985:72). I disagree with this assessment of these characters. It would be unfair to deem them as "flat". In a work with as many characters as *God's Bits of Wood*, one can hardly expect every single character to be well rounded or fully developed. I would suggest that they are what Lukács calls artistic types (1963:124). By using a peripheral character such as Ramatoulaye, Ousmane creates an example of "the concrete and extreme potentialities of human beings in extreme conditions" (Lukács 1956:23). In the scene where she kills Vendredi, Ramatoulaye exhibits such awesome courage. When the officers come to take her

away she defiantly refuses to send the meat of Vendredi away, with them. The women marvel at her new-found courage:

They scarcely recognized the woman beside them as the Ramatoulaye they had always known, and they asked themselves where she had found this new strength (1960:74).

Ramatoulaye's courage is infectious, as it inspires the other women to defy the authorities by attacking them. They even follow her to the police station. But after this particular chapter, she is not heard of again. She elicits comment without doing much speaking. Various interpretations of her actions are possible, one of which could be that each person has inherent potential to change situations through their actions.

Another typical character is Sounkare, the watchman. He is an example of one who is not united with the strikers and, so, his fate is horrible. He ends up having a very miserable death:

Sounkare bent over to retrieve his cane, but the effort to straighten up again was too much for him and he pitched forward into the pit. His skull struck against the gray cement...his legs seemed to fold up beside him, then slowly straightened and lay still. Two rats descended cautiously into the pit...They circled the body...and then two of the hardest climbed up to the head and face. They began their work with the lips and the eyeballs (1960:135).

His death seems to predict the fate of those who are short-sighted and are reluctant to see change. He is complacent with the situation of getting by with the little his employers pay him. Nevertheless, Ousmane is able to arouse our sympathy for him. He makes his entrance and exit in one chapter and we are acquainted with him through the flashback technique. We are told just enough about him and his loneliness to feel sympathetic towards him. This is what Palmer describes as Ousmane's power of psychological penetration (1973:8).

Houdia M'Baye is a peripheral character that is used by Sembéne to reveal the mercilessness of the officials. She is the mother of nine children, including the baby they name "Strike". When the fire hoses are turned on outside of the jail on the women, she panics and dies leaving her children orphans:

She opened her mouth to cry out, but no sound came forth, and the pitiful little snapping of the cartilage in her neck was lost in the roar of the hoses (1960:122).

Ousmane uses minimal emotive language but describes enough of the death to create an impact. The implication of her death is what arouses our sympathy for her and our anger toward the authorities.

The character Beaugosse develops during the course of the novel, not for the better though. He is at the beginning, an intellectual who is on the side of the strikers. He soon loses his focus because of his personal dislike of Bakayoko and eventually switches sides and becomes a traitor:

Nor does Ousmane flinch from exposing the inadequacies of the other characters and the complex motives of their actions. Thus, Beaugosse, tortured by sexual jealousy of Bakayoko, is driven to resign from the Union and ally himself with the imperialists (Palmer 1973:9).

Ousmane seems to be pointing out that sometimes it is not only material motives that influence people but, also, emotional issues that drive people to act against their better judgment. The traitorous figure in *Germinal* is Chaval. In the same way that Beaugosse is envious of Bakayoko, Chaval is envious of Étienne. The difference between the rivalry in *Germinal* is that it is more open and hostile, whereas Bakayoko does not know of Beaugosse's hatred for him. Chaval, like Beaugosse, becomes a traitor for financial gain. He is offered a position at Le Voreux in spite of agreeing to stand with all the other strikers (1885:382).

Ousmane very deliberately portrays his female characters as strong, even though they may possess different personalities and positions in society. In his portrayal of the women characters in the novel, he creates a picture of society with strong women who are not undervalued. In this is a good example of what Fischer describes as art that is “forward-thrusting” (1959:207). In *God's Bits of Wood*, Ad'jibid'ji is representative of the future of African women. She does not see herself in the traditional roles occupied by her preceding generations. She breaks society's little rules for women by attending the meetings about the strike. She is also well educated and speaks 3 languages (French, Bambara and Wolof) quite well. Then there is N'Deye Touti, who can be described as obsessed with the West. She is quite educated and despises her African heritage:

N'Deye Touti had grown up in this very spot; she had played in these tortuous alleyways, these vermin-ridden courtyards and gloomy cabins. The memory was as sharp as the pain of an open wound, and she was almost ready to bless the fire which had destroyed the witnesses to her childhood and her shame. She had a vision of houses painted in clear, fresh colors, of gardens filled with flowers, and children in European clothes playing in tidy courtyards (1960:115).

She is clearly ashamed of her past and who she is. She longs to be someone that she can never be namely, a European. However, her experience of the strike changes her outlook on life and she casts off her romanticized view of being European and embraces her African heritage. She thus redeems herself in the eyes of the reader.

Despite Maimouna's physical disability she is not treated like an invalid in the way she is portrayed. Instead of her blindness, making her a weak character, she is actually a solid character. The reader feels her pain when she loses the baby at the beginning but, we are never led to pity her. She is, in fact, able to perceive things that those that have sight are actually blind to. She confesses to Penda:

I have learned to know what people are thinking, and to understand what is said between the words that are spoken, and I tell you this: in Bakayoko's heart there is no room for anyone (1960:196).

Maimouna is able to perceive Bakayoko's callousness. She was not moved by the impressive 'leader' exterior that everyone else saw.

The weakest part of Ousmane's characterization is his white characters as they are all quite stereotypical. This is where Ngara's criticism of Ousmane may be justified (1985:72). One actually gets the feeling that these characters, were added in because of necessity, had Ousmane had a choice he would have probably opted to leave them out, as they are so underdeveloped. All of the whites are racist, except Leblanc, who was an alcoholic. The capitalists in *Germinal* are explored in much greater detail. The reader is made aware of their thoughts and feelings on the strike. We are also given a much better picture of their personal lives. This is probably so because Zola was part of the bourgeois.

What ultimately places *God's Bits of Wood* in the socialist realist category is the "spontaneity/consciousness" dialectic. According to Clark, it is the fundamental idea that shapes a socialist realist text. "Consciousness" means actions that are controlled/guided by politically aware bodies, and "spontaneity" means actions that are uncoordinated or anarchic (Clark 1981:15). In *Germinal* there was an imbalance of spontaneity and consciousness; in fact, there was only the former. That strike was ill timed and not organized. This is the reason for the failure of the strike. The opposite holds true for the strike of *God's Bits of Wood*. Both spontaneity and consciousness exist in this text. The whole strike is informed by a politically informed body, which is the worker's union. On the other hand, episodes of spontaneity are also evident; the most obvious would be the women's march. Both are required to effect progress:

This dialectic provides the driving force of progress and leads to history's end in communism...The ultimate stage of historical development, communism, is reached in a final synthesis, which resolves the dialectic once and for all (Clark 1981:16).

In *God's Bits of Wood*, there is a definite shift from spontaneity to consciousness. At the beginning of the novel, the women appear largely ignorant of the reasons and the nature of the strike. They are tremendously affected by all the impoverishment around them. As the novel progresses, they begin to understand the reasons for the strike, and this leads them to take on that courageous march.

God's Bits of Wood can be seen as naturalist in style, yet socialist in perspective, because of all the criteria it has fulfilled (shown in this chapter). According to Charles Nnolim (1992), *God's Bits of Wood* is a unique combination of Marxism and creative novel writing. Like many other African novelists, for example, Ngugi, Ousmane has concerned himself with the masses. Once this concern for the masses is established, one can then infer that *God's Bits of Wood* is "socialist art" because one of the main pre-requisites for such is the "writer's fundamental agreement with the aims of the working class and the emerging socialist world" (Fischer 1959:108). He has succeeded in writing a socialist/Marxist novel:

It is a proletarian Marxist novel *par excellence*, with the normal revolutionary fervour; the normal subject matter which deals with the class struggle, trade disputes, strikes and the attendant brutalities inflicted by the capitalist compradors; treacheries from certain members of the proletariat who have been bought over by the capitalist oppressors; lynchings of traitors who subvert the workers solidarity; the resultant negotiations between the workers and their oppressors; and finally, the triumph of the proletariat over the authorities as part of the denouement(Nnolim 1992:50).

However, this is not a conventional Marxist novel. Although it may contain these 'vital' elements of a Marxist novel, it contains 'vital' elements of a truly artistic and imaginative novel, by arranging these somewhat dull elements into a convincing, coherent whole. In this arrangement lies the success of *God's Bits of Wood*. It is also the manner in which certain

characters and situations are portrayed using the socialist realist technique that has made this work Sembéne's masterpiece. This conclusion seems to be at odds with Lukács' argument. In his essay on "Critical Realism and Socialist Realism" (1956), he restricts socialist realism to socialist countries. What negates this train of thought is the fact that Senegal was not a socialist country at the time *God's Bits of Wood* was written, nor is it now, yet Ousmane makes gestures towards socialist realism.

According to Nnolim (1992:51), it is the moral (the theme of good triumphing over evil) aspects of the novel that allow it to transcend the concerns of vulgar Marxism. If we consider all of the above categories, we discover that Ousmane does much more than give us a polemic in *God's Bits of Wood*; he writes a compelling novel that delves into the power of the human spirit as well as the power of unity. In doing so, one can agree with Nnolim that the novel rises above Marxist propaganda to a work that is aesthetically pleasing:

Finally, what lifts the novel above Marxist propaganda is the arrangement and organization of the conventional staple elements of Marxist literature into a coherent, artistic, aesthetically pleasing whole (1992:65).

CHAPTER THREE: *Petals of Blood*: Socialist Art or Propaganda?

By most accounts he is the best known and most widely-read African writer from East Africa (Tsabedze 1994:40).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is arguably one of Africa's most famous authors. He was born in 1938 in Kenya. There is extensive coverage of Ngugi's biography in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings* (Cook and Okenimkpe 1997), of which there is a brief summary here. He began his schooling career when he was about nine years old. He then went to high school at Kenya's first fully-fledged secondary school for African students, Alliance High School. This is where he became religiously aware. His works are marked by this awareness, as they contain many biblical references. This awareness has made him highly critical of Christianity. The use of biblical references clearly illustrates the hypocrisy of certain individuals because they live their lives contradictory to scripture. This argument is more thoroughly explored later on in this chapter. Unlike Ousmane who did not go to university, Ngugi went on to study at Makerere University College in Kampala. He was an excellent student and obtained his Honours in English in 1963. The British Syllabus that he was exposed to had an influence on him, especially writers such as Lawrence and Conrad. He gained his apprenticeship as a writer by way of a brief stint at journalism in *Penpoint* magazine. His experiences abroad expanded his outlook on a variety of issues. Ngugi's first novel was *Weep Not, Child*, which was published in 1964. It was the first of many novels that were to follow, such as *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1978), which have proved popular in certain African studies curricula. He has also published many plays, some of which can be found in *This Time Tomorrow and Other Plays* (1968). Ngugi has not limited his work to English, as he has written both plays and novels in his mother tongue, Gikuyu.

It is evident from his writings that his concern is basically social issues. His thinking on these issues has developed as he has matured. Cook and Okenimkpe outline three basic phases of this growth: The first is a moralist-humanist outlook on life; in the second phase he concentrated on the subjects of capitalism, socialism and nationalism; and the final phase is charact

revulsion for the new African elite that emerged after independence (1997:15). His writings have often been perceived as a threat to the government and so, he had been imprisoned with no substantial charge brought against him. A few days after his play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, written in Gikuyu, was staged and subsequently banned, Ngugi was arrested and imprisoned. His play was seen as too provocative by the then government. He was detained for 12 months. The details of his imprisonment can be found in his work *Detained: A Writer's Diary* (1981).

Petals of Blood was published in 1977 and its critical reception has been wide and varied, not only for its content but also because its author was imprisoned at the time. It is described as a key work in Ngugi's development (Cook and Okenimkpe 1997:9). The publication of this novel is also described as a turning point in his literary career (Tsabedze 1994:39). Masilela comments that the realism used by Ngugi has achieved the task of capturing "the dense texture of real history and historical hymns on which the novel feeds" (1979:23). Ngara's conclusion is also a very positive one:

From an ideological standpoint, Ngugi's novel is socialist art *par excellence*, for 'it expresses the thoughts, feelings, moods, points of view and hopes of the new epoch and of its new class'. We can therefore conclude that *Petals of Blood* is a very successful blend of artistic excellence and ideological clarity (1985:84).

Ngara's observations are correct when he says that the novel exudes ideological clarity. In fact, it has been described as a socialist pastoral elegy (Ogundele 1995:126). The application of the label "socialist art par excellence" is made with the assumption that if a text is written from a socialist perspective, then it automatically constitutes art. *Petals of Blood* is, indeed, a departure from his earlier literary works in many ways, especially with regard to his over-riding political agenda. In the light of Ngugi's ideology, Jürgen Martini comments on the "unsatisfactory quality of Ngugi's writing whenever Karega's political activities and thoughts are mentioned", as well as how Karega evolves into a "de-individualised character" (1984:290). His exposition of capitalism and the new elite in the form of the Kenyatta government that wielded power at that time is obvious. It is a very bold work both politically and personally:

Petals of Blood has been received in Kenya and the rest of the world of books as a political bombshell of a novel. All the reviews here and abroad have hailed the book as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's greatest achievement to date (Treister 1984:267).

The sense of duty to provide social comment is quite evident. This is, of course, in keeping with Ngugi's belief that a novel has to be socially relevant:

I think that if the novel is to be meaningful it must reflect the totality of the forces affecting the lives of the people. And all the great novels, even in the bourgeois critical and literary tradition, have reflected this totality of forces at a particular moment of history (Sicherman 1990: 24).

It is my contention that, with *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi has succeeded in reflecting this totality of forces at work in that particular moment in history when Kenya had already gained independence, and, as such, has created a truly meaningful social realist text. However, in doing so, the question remains whether this ambition has impacted on the aesthetic value of the novel.

Petals of Blood is divided into four main parts. Each starts off with a little excerpt that indicates more or less the contents therein. These are signposts in the novel as they predict central themes. For example, Part One is prefaced with a paragraph of Revelations Chapter Six from the bible. Within the quoted verses, there are themes of violence, famine and death that are prevalent. Almost all of these themes are immediately picked up in chapter one which begins with the arrest of the three main characters (Munira, Karega and Abdulla) who are prime suspects in the murder of three important directors of a beer company. In this way, violence and death are both present. Munira is asked to make a statement and so he starts recounting how it all began twelve years ago. The bulk of the narrative takes the form of Munira's written statement. The narrative does come back to the present at times, but there are also flashbacks within flashbacks.

We learn that Munira's reason for being in Illmorog is primarily to escape. He is seen by his family, especially his father, as a failure because he was not able to attain the kind of success that his other siblings had. We are also introduced to the other main characters that are seeking refuge in Illmorog as well. They end up in this deserted village that is plagued with famine because of the drought. Karega suggests that they obtain the assistance of their M.P. for Illmorog, Nderi wa Riera. A small group from the village forms and marches to Nairobi to ask for delivery on promises made during election campaigning. This is an enlightening journey as it exposes the corruption in post-independence Kenya. Their efforts have a two-pronged outcome i.e. they get the desired relief, but this is at the expense of their entire way of life that is subsequently drastically changed.

The four main characters find out that their pasts are linked when old Nyakinjua brews a batch of Thenget'a, a traditional beer. It is this complex web of networks between characters and their pasts that come to the fore. In a way, it is quite mysterious how they are so intimately linked. The reader is left to unravel these complex associations as the plot unfolds. Munira was involved in a strike at Siriana High School with Chui. The latter became headmaster of that same school when Karega attended there. Munira and Karega are also connected through Mukami, Munira's sister, who committed suicide. Mukami's parents did not particularly like her boyfriend, Karega. Karega is the little brother of Nding'uri. Abdulla fought alongside Nding'uri during the State of Emergency. Abdulla is also connected to Wanja through Hawkins Kimeria, who sexually abused her. Abdulla knew Kimeria as the man who gained wealth by transporting dead Mau Mau corpses during the Emergency. After these revelations, they each face up to the demons of their pasts and chart out a path for themselves that differs widely from one another. The novel concludes with the murder mystery being solved as Munira confesses to setting Wanja's brothel on fire. However, the final focus is on Karega who is still in jail. He receives news of the strike that is imminent, and he is assured that his efforts in the brewery union have not been in vain as they have impacted on many.

The style employed in *Petals of Blood* is most appropriately labeled realist. According to Martini, the book's great value lies in the way Ngugi presents reality that is, the particular presentation of historical facts (such as the oath-swearing ceremony) (1984:287). Ngara elaborates further on Ngugi's realism:

A significant feature of Ngugi's technique and style is realism. In his descriptive passages he is not merely naturalistic, simply reproducing photographic representations of reality with abstract and detached objectivity. Instead he sees the connection between the individual and the general, the 'typical' and the 'particular' in the Lukács sense (1985:83).

This statement puts Ngugi's style into perspective. Although the narrative is a recreation of historical fact, it is not presented in a naturalist way. The nature of the realism found in the novel resonates with Lukács' description of socialist realism. Ngara elaborates on Ngugi's ability to assimilate the complex relations of man within society. However, in his analysis of Ngugi's descriptive passages later on in that chapter, Ngara also picks up on the fact that "the book is unnecessarily wordy at times" (1985:84). The latter is a more accurate description of Ngugi's style. In fact the wordiness of the novel renders it tedious at times. For example, there is an unnecessarily long discussion on the debate on the importance of crops or cattle, which spans at least a page. In trying to capture the routine of everyday life, Ngugi is often guilty of straying from the essence of the chapter. One could ask how important the debate between the crop farmers and the cattle farmers is when he is trying to illustrate Munira's feelings of guilt of not actually living but merely existing:

He would suddenly become conscious of never having done or willed anything to happen, that he was doomed to roam this world, a stranger (Ngugi 1982:18).

Despite this apparent shortcoming, Ngugi effectively uses other aspects of realism. One of the techniques of realism is the use of authenticating devices. There are several of these devices in the novel. He makes mention of the non-fictional Mau-Mau movement, of which both Abdulla and Karega's brother were a part. He also uses "...La Luta Continua!" as a heading to the fourth

part of the novel which is a nationalist slogan initially articulated by Amilcar Cabral. These two aspects serve the function of providing historical soundness, thus attaining a sense of authenticity.

The thrust of the novel is to show the effects of neo-colonialism on both society and the individual. The effect on society is evident in the change of the quiet agricultural village of Illmorog to commercialized New Illmorog. The problems that faced the people were far worse than the natural problem of drought. Commercialization had brought with it removal from land and prostitution of both women and culture. We are then shown how each of the main characters reacts to these changes. Both Abdulla and Wanja first try to get a piece of the economic pie but fail with the brewery attempt. Abdulla resorts to being a roadside vendor and Wanja reverts to being a highly paid prostitute. Munira turns to religion and Karega becomes an activist. We are meant to emulate Karega. His is the “correct” way out of such social ills. This is in keeping with the tasks accorded to Russian writers, according to Clark. She asserts that one of the tasks of a Russian writer was to show social ills and provide characters that would be models of how to get out of these ills (Clark 1981:46). Ngugi’s aim seems to be the same, that is, to expose that which is wrong in post-independence Kenya, and then to show the way forward. His characterization allows him to drive home his socialist message. This message is made explicit at the end of the novel as Karega reflects on the current situation:

Imperialism: capitalism: landlords: earthworms. A system that bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society...These parasites would always demand the sacrifice of the working masses. These few who had prostituted the whole land by turning it over to foreigners for thorough exploitation...the system and its gods and its angels had to be fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people! (1982:344).

This passage effectively sums up the crux of the socialist message, which is that although imperialism and capitalism are powerful structures, they can be toppled by the banding together of the working class people in unity and raising their consciousness.

The interrelation between characters and the forces (historical events and other people) that ultimately shape their lives, is what places this book on a social realist level. They start off separately but, as they begin to find out about each other, they discover that their lives are intertwined:

Ngugi's characterization in *Petals of Blood* displays three dominant features which have become constant features of his novelistic technique: the actions and responses of the characters are socio-historically conditioned; the lives of the major characters are intricately linked and their "secret lives" as individuals within a social totality are probed through very incisive psychological portraiture (Amuta 1989:150).

The past experiences continue to shape them. This goes against the principles of naturalism that holds to Darwinian theory (very crudely: man's actions are a subject to his genes and the environment). The novel, unlike naturalism, suggests that man is a free-will agent and chooses how to react, even though his experiences have an impact on him. A clear example of free-will is Wanja's sexual exploitation as a teenager and her subsequent abortion both of which can be seen as the deciding factor in her leading a life of prostitution. Yet, she changes the situation to her advantage. If men were going to exploit her for her body then she was going to exploit them for their money because she refused to be a victim any longer (Ngugi 1977:294). This is the realization that she comes to after all the experiences in her life.

There are many such realizations that take place. The journey to the city has a great deal to do with these. They successfully get the MP for Illmorog, Nderi wa Riera, to address the problem of drought in the village. When he begins to speak, the people are able to see through his hollow promises and caring façade, so they pelt him with orange peels and anything else they could find (1982:183). Then there is Karega, the ideologized hero who represents the new conscientized generation. Cook and Okenimkpe assert that he is Ngugi's prototype of the oppressed poor who learn to resist oppression and envisage the reconstruction of society (1997:93). Karega does not

agree with Wanja's philosophy of "eat or you are eaten"; he believes that society can be changed:

And suddenly in that moment, remembering in a flash all the places he had been to, he was clear about the force for which he had been searching, the force that would change things and create the basis of a new order (1982:298).

Karega has systematic plans on how he is going to topple the capitalist sector of Illmorog. The beer industry in Illmorog is very lucrative; so, he gets himself into Thenget's Breweries and begins to distribute pamphlets. He then organizes a union. His efforts are successful when one considers that the whole workforce in Illmorog decides to go on strike at the end of the novel.

His initial learning comes from a liberal lawyer. In this way, the novel follows the trend set in Soviet Socialist realism where there is the "mentor" and "disciple" relationship:

The second is the pattern in which a relatively naïve person is brought to see the light by some emissary of the new enlightenment (Clark 1981:49).

The lawyer's speech seems to be a catalyst in Karega's journey towards gaining clarity of vision (1982:176). He asks the lawyer to provide him with literature so that he could learn more. All he finds, though, are books that avoid sensitive issues such as colonialism and imperialism. When Karega is sufficiently frustrated, the lawyer explains that everything, even history, has been tainted by imperialism. Ultimately, there can be no neutral history or politics. The only way forward is to look around for oneself and choose to be on the right side (1982:200). The enlightenment that he experiences brings about the realization that he is able to change circumstances. Thus, his character grows continually in the awareness of what he can achieve:

As soon as the literary character becomes fully purposeful and conscious of his purposefulness, he can become a "positive hero" (Tertz 1960:48).

This statement aptly describes Karega's role in the novel. My contention is that Karega is a positive hero as he embodies a majority of the traits of the "positive hero" discussed by Katerina Clark (1981). Although her analysis comprises of Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, the aims of the novels are similar, so it lends itself to comparison. Clark points out:

Although he became a cornerstone of Soviet Realism, the idea behind the positive hero – that he should be "typical", should exemplify moral and political (or religious) virtue, and should show the "way forward" for Russia – was, as happened so often when an intelligentsia convention was adopted into Soviet culture, interpreted with great literalism, extremism, and rigidity (1981:46).

Ngugi uses Karega to show what ought to be. His ways of both thinking and acting are indicative of the kind of behaviour that Ngugi envisions in a socialist society. However, the disadvantage of having such a character in the novel is that he becomes too formulaic. Clark is quick to pick up on this in her analysis of the character Pavel in *Mother*, when she observes that his portrait is both depersonalized and a function of his political (rather than individual) identity. This line of thought is taken up again later in this chapter when Ngugi's aesthetics are discussed.

The character of Munira is shown in opposition to Karega's. He is a confused and suppressed individual. He is the pivotal character in the novel because much of the narrative is from his point of view in the form of the police report. A tired and disillusioned individual, he leaves home to escape to Illmorog. His life is symbolic of the failure of religious fanaticism. There is a foreshadow of what he would do to Wanja's hut later on in the narrative:

Instead, he had gone home, convinced that inwardly he had given himself up to the Lord, and decided to do something about his sins. He stole a matchbox,...built an imitation of Amina's house at Kamiritho where he had sinned against the Lord, and burnt it (1982:14).

He is an example of a typical religious fanatic. At first, he rebels against religion by marrying a “heathen”, but eventually succumbs to a life of religion. This fanaticism leads him to eventually burn up Wanja’s brothel. He justifies this action by thinking that it was an action that would “save” Karega. This kind of typical character contributes to the realist nature of the text (Lukács 56:43). It could be that his lack of direction is what drove him to religion:

But he always hesitated. It was as if he would not have known what he was running away from and what he was running toward (1982:91).

Wanja’s character is symbolic of the common experiences that women go through, that is, their exploitation in an unjust male-dominated society. Ngugi fashions her with care. Despite her role as barmaid and prostitute, she gains the reader’s sympathy because of her painful past. We are given an insight into her past in order to recognize that certain forces, beyond her control, have made her what she now is. Given the extreme circumstances she has been put through, she develops a very cold “Eat or you are eaten” attitude to her fellow man. This can be viewed as her coping mechanism. In order to avoid further pain, her cold attitude protects her.

Abdulla’s involvement with the Mau-Mau movement is Ngugi’s way of linking history to the narrative. He represents part of the proletariat that fought for independence and has not seen the rewards of that service to his country. There is a dismal outcome where he has lost a limb so that the upper classes could benefit. That limb, according to Amuta (1989:146), is a physical symbol of the sacrifices made by the peasants for the independence of their nation. He is of the disillusioned generation and so Ngugi uses him to illustrate his point. We are taken into the thoughts of Abdulla:

how was it that a boss who had never once lifted a load, who never once dirtied his hands in the smelly water and air in the tannery or in any other part of the complex, could still live in a big house and own a car and employ a driver and more than four people only to cut grass in the compound (1982:136).

This train of thought is traced back to a chapter in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The making of a Rebel*, where he writes frankly on his thoughts. Here he goes to great lengths to describe the ills of a class society:

Labour produces, Capital disposes. The maker or producer of pottery produces pots but he has no pot for his own use; the shoemaker makes shoes, but he walks barefoot; the builder builds magnificent houses but he himself does not live in them – instead he continues to live in shacks...(Sicherman 1990:24).

Ngugi's analysis is clearly informed by Marxist theory of labour and surplus value, in terms of which the worker produces but the capitalist is the one who benefits from the profits. This kind of criticism of the discrepancies between rich and poor comes through very clearly in *Petals of Blood*.

Munira, Wanja, Abdulla and Karega are the four main characters in the novel and, as we have seen, they are portrayed from the inside, that is, all of their histories and emotions are incorporated into the narrative. This is in keeping with the social realist perspective that seeks to describe the forces working toward socialism from the inside (Lukács 1956:94). His peripheral characters, on the other hand, are left unexplored. This is mainly because they are part of the capitalist elite that he is critical of. Chui, Mzigo, Hawkins Kimeria are three of the several typical characters in the novel. Masilela endeavours to clarify the appropriateness of typical characters:

The typification of characters renders possible a portrayal of the unity of the totality of relationships and objects within their social context (1979:20).

These three characters are embodiments of the very successful bourgeoisie in post-independence Kenya who have achieved power and status at the expense of others. According to Clark, such "negative" characters are used to represent the current situation, that is, the reality of the present (1981:46).

Hawkins Kimeria, for example, is a ruthless individual who serves money and is served by it.

For Kimeria, money is alpha and omega; with a sickening matter-of-factness, he coolly deploys its power in the ruthless pursuit of his interests (Cook and Okenimkpe 1997:89).

His ruthlessness leaves Wanja scarred for life. As a teenager, he makes her pregnant and she is consequently expelled from school. She turns to the only option she feels is available to her, prostitution. The second time their paths cross, he forces her to sleep with him again and humiliates her. Chui, is much like Kimeria in his lust for wealth. He starts off as a student leader who strikes in the hope of achieving better conditions at school, but ultimately turns against his people at the lure of riches. Ngugi's caricature politician is Nderi wa Riera. He is indicative of a vile sort and his name quite appropriately means "Vulture son of the Air" (Treister 1984:268). He openly uses his political office for personal gain. He does not care about the interests of his voters unless it is election time. Ngugi sees men like Nderi collectively as social plague (Cook and Okenimkpe 1997:90). In arguing against the imposition of Western literary standards being used to analyze this novel, Pelsmaekers suggests that the use of allegorical figures such as Reverend Hallows Ironmonger, Sir Swallow Bloodall and Cambridge Fraudsham, is a distinct feature of the African genre. For example the animal tale would have descriptive names for characters (1983:8). One could even go further and say that to criticize the novel of being too obvious for satirical purposes would be to assume that satire was the intention of the author in the first place. This, of course, is a circular argument.

As has been previously indicated, the novel is divided into four parts, each with a heading that predicts the contents of the chapter. When the four headings are strung together they make up a sentence: "Walking Toward Bethlehem To be Born Again...La Luta Continua!" The reader is being taken on a journey with the characters. This particular journey will result in multiple discoveries by the characters and these experiences are there to raise the reader's consciousness. Two of the central characters are "born again". The first is Munira. At the onset of the novel, Munira is anti-religion and he looks as if he is going to be the chief protagonist of the novel, as

much of the narration is from his viewpoint (since he is the one writing the police report). However, he undergoes a transformation, and, by the end of the novel, he is fully converted into a religious fanatic. His way of freeing society of corruption is arson and murder. He burns up Wanja's whorehouse and, in so doing, murders Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria who were in it. The following extract shows Munira's illogical train of thought:

Munira had been so convinced that this world was wrong, was a mistake, that he wanted all his friends to see this and escape in time... It was enjoined on him to burn down the whorehouse – which mocked God's work on earth...he had finally affirmed oneness with the Law (1982:332-333).

Ngugi is highly critical of Christianity and those who are Christians, portraying them as either hypocrites (e.g. Rev Ironmonger) or crazy (e.g. Munira). This is indicative of his anti-religious stance that is portrayed as a "false consciousness" (Masilela 1979:22).

If religion is false consciousness, what is true consciousness? The other central character that is "born again" is Karega. He is the embodiment of "true consciousness". His mentor, as aforementioned, is the lawyer who is merely Ngugi's mouthpiece. This is so apparent that he does not even have a name. He is the nameless voice of reason. Ngugi describes him as one of the "progressive elements in the upper echelons of society" (1985:80). The ideological thrust becomes quite evident when the lawyer speaks of capitalism and the emerging affluent black upper class. His "speech" goes on for approximately 3 pages, after which Karega seems to be mentally stimulated:

But the talk aroused in him a curiosity, an excitement, as if his mind was about to reach, grasp, grapple with an elusive idea, as if indeed a coherent structure of outlook was forming in the bewildered universe and chaos of his own experience and history (1982:166).

The lawyer does play a pivotal role in enlightening Karega; however, one must question how such lengthy monologues affect the novel aesthetically. This is a question that will be addressed at the end of the chapter. But the lawyer's role in the novel is cut short when he is killed, so, the focus turns to the ideologized man, Karega. Karega begins a union at the Brewery and this idea snowballs when he is held prisoner. All the workers of Illmorog go on strike and march. There is a contrast between Karega's working-class consciousness and Munira's religion. Karega even goes so far as to echo a Marxist opinion that religion was the "opium" of the masses:

But inwardly he knew that religion, any religion, was a weapon against the workers (1982:305).

Ngugi establishes, with Karega, what he thinks the right path forward is for the country.

The element of hope and a transformed society are strong features in *Petals of Blood*. Fischer points out that it is an element of socialist art to anticipate the future (1964:111). The novel ends on a very promising note and a vision of the future of Kenya by Karega:

Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system of all its preying bloodthirsty gods...bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many...only then would the kingdom of man and women really begin...For a minute he was so carried on the waves of this vision and of the possibilities it opened up for all the Kenyan working and peasant masses...(1982:344).

The novel ends off with Karega contemplating tomorrow, which is a very positive outlook. This revealing of possibilities is, according to Terry Eagleton, in line with Lukács' view on socialist realism (1976:52). Karega is the visionary of the novel, as he recognizes the potential of the people. A common trend in socialist realist novels is the reflection of positive, revolutionary changes that would be the result of the integration of Marxist principles (Ambrose 1995:195). In response to Wanja's pessimism about the world, Karega clings on to his belief that there must be another way than the present situation of either being the "prey" or being the predator. The

realization suddenly dawns upon him that things can change and there would be a “new order” (1982:294).

The novel seems to have all the right ingredients, as we have seen thus far, to situate it in the social realist category. These elements are no guarantee that it will eventually result in a good novel. There are certain aspects that spoil the novel, the first of which is the artificial way that all the main characters are linked together. One is inclined to ask what the probability is of four strangers who have only met by going to a remote village, being ultimately intimately intertwined through their respective pasts. The interweaving of their lives is too contrived to be plausible. And all this is only revealed the night they drink Nyakinjua’s *thenge’ta* mixture. Before that night, one is left to assume that they spoke of very superficial matters as they had never come close to discovering how interconnected their lives really were. When the delegation goes to the city, they meet ghosts from their past like Kimeria.

The second aspect that mars the novel is the style of writing itself:

The book is unnecessarily wordy at times. The economy and tautness of *A Grain of Wheat* is gone and our writer is tempted to be prolific in style (Ngara 1985:84).

This is an apt description of *Petals of Blood*, which is often too dense and at times, painfully drawn-out when attempting to clarify certain issues. This often happens when the characters engage in a kind of reverie, for example, the lawyer (1982:163-166) and Karega (1982:344). It is at these times that Ngugi becomes didactic and the story itself is temporarily shelved.

The third is the constant flux in time and the continual change of narration. There are flashbacks within flashbacks. This can often detract from the actual story when the reader is trying to discern who is speaking and when these events are taking place. His flashbacks are meant to provide unity to the narrative but often have the opposite effect. The fourth is also not as severe as the first two aspects, and that is the constant foreshadowing of what is to take place. As

aforementioned, Munira's response to sleeping with Amina (namely, making a little impression of her hut and burning it) predicts what he would later do to Wanja's whorehouse when he perceived her as a bad influence on Karega. Wanja's constant dreams of fire are also indicative of that same event. This type of foreshadowing subdues the suspense of the plot. This could very well have been Ngugi's intention in order to highlight his socialist agenda. But this, of course, is only an assumption.

There can be no doubt that *Petals of Blood* is a socialist realist text. This conclusion is made in the light of the various socialist realist elements that are present in the novel. This chapter has examined how Ngugi has used elements such as the "positive hero" in the form of Karega to illustrate the way forward, and, of course, typical characters to ensure lasting value of the work. The working class characters are also explored from the inside. Most important of these elements is the socialist perspective that has been discussed at length as giving rise to the utopian denouement. This socialist agenda has (as aforementioned) been criticized. To this critique I would also add the lawyer who is merely a tool in the novel. He is de-individualised from his first appearance in the novel, as he has no name. The distinguishing feature of socialist realism is that it envisions a positive future. This is the case with *Petals of Blood*. However, the manner in which Ngugi broaches utopianism is yet another point of criticism:

Whenever he introduces this utopian feature into the novel the writing becomes sentimental and downright bad. This is a way of thinking about society and a stylistic incompetence which Ngugi shares with other utopian writers (Martini 1984:290).

All these factors have, according to Martini, led to the novel being a stylistic failure. However, it may be too harsh to say that the novel is downright bad as there are certain moments in the novel that contain good writing. I share Palmer's view that the reader is left with an uneasy feeling at the conclusion of the novel as a result of Ngugi's over-ambitiousness. Simply put, he tries to incorporate too much in one novel (1984:283). Ultimately, one may categorise *Petals of Blood* in terms of what Lukács deems as "illustrative" literature:

The writer analyses his problem theoretically and thinks up suitable characters to 'illustrate' it (1956:122).

Ngugi allows his ideological stance to dominate the novel. What is left is a socialist realist text that fails to be aesthetically pleasing.

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CHAPTER FOUR: *Mayombe*: Realism in a Resistance Narrative

Artur Maurício Carlos Pestana dos Santos was born in 1941 in Benguela, Angola. He received his primary and secondary education in Benguela and Lubango. His tertiary studies were done at the Instituto Superior Tecnico and Universidade de Lisboa. In Algeria, he studied sociology and when he returned to Angola, he became an MPLA guerilla. In the latter part of the 1960s, he began to write using the literary pseudonym, Pepetela. As we have seen with the likes of Ousmane, works of literature are shaped mainly by the author's life experience. Pepetela's works are written with balanced perspective. He is an intellectual who has become actively involved in the struggle. There is, as we shall see, comprehensiveness in his writing, which stems from this background. He has written many novels and novellas of which the subject of discussion will be *Mayombe*(1983) his second novel.

Mayombe has a very innovative narrative structure. The omniscient narrator is often interrupted by the thoughts of one of the characters. The first such intrusive narrative is Theory's narrative:

I, THE NARRATOR, AM THEORY.

I was born in Gabela, in coffee country. From the land I received the dark colour of coffee, from my mother's side, mixed with off-white from my father, a Portuguese trader. I carry in me the irreconcilable and that is my driving force. In a universe of yes or no, white or black, I represent the maybe. Maybe says no for someone who wants to hear yes and means yes for someone who wants to hear no. Is it my fault if men insist on purity and reject compounds? Am I the one who must turn into a yes or a no? Or must men accept the maybe? In the face of this essential problem, people are divided in my view into two categories: Manichaeans and the rest. It is worth explaining that the rest are rare; the World generally is Manichaean (1983:1-2).

This particular portion comes after the opening of the novel's first chapter, where Theory is hurt and is hiding his pain, despite it being so severe. Theory's narrative serves as an explanation of why he reacts this way. These intrusive narratives are structured such that they are used to

explain certain behaviours and actions of the characters. In this way, even though they interrupt the omniscient narrator, they do not interrupt the actual flow of the narrative. Because of the way it is structured, the reader always knows who is speaking. The reader gains access into the inner workings of the minds of the characters and is allowed to form opinions on the personality of these MPLA guerillas, rather than being told what to think about them.

The narrative follows a fairly simple plot that spans over a small amount of time. Their first attack is a logging site where they destroy the machinery and take the workers captive. They then proceed to educate the workers and dispel the myths (perpetuated by the Portuguese colonialists) about the MPLA. The guerillas eventually go back to their base at the heart of Mayombe only to find that they have run out of food. The Commissar is accompanied by another guerilla to the town of Dolisie, which is the supply base.

It is at Dolisie that the reader meets Ondine who is engaged to the Commissar. She has an affair with Andre, who is in charge of Dolisie but abuses his power for self-satisfaction. The affair between them sparks off a whole series of reactions. The person who it affects the most though is the Commissar. The last mission of the novel requires the guerillas to go to their old base, Fallen Branch, where the “tugas” have moved in. Fearless, the Commander, dies in the battle and is buried in the Mayombe forest. It takes this tragedy to complete the Commissar’s metamorphosis.

The story is set in the heart of Mayombe forest in Angola during the liberation struggle around 1969-1970:

Pepetela wrote *Mayombe* in the early 1970s...At that time, the MPLA Second Political-Military Region, which included the province of Cabinda...was in a period of reorganization...Pepetela has explained that *Mayombe* reflects the conditions in 1969-70, when a relatively small group of guerillas were able to turn around the situation in the Second Region...The experiences, difficulties of continued guerilla activity, and the

attempt to gain popular support in Cabinda during the extended period of impasse inform *Mayombe*'s narrative as a type of collective testimonial of revolutionary struggle (Peres 1997:72).

Pepetela employs realism to create a simulacrum of reality at that point in Angolan history. It is this historical context that Peres underlines here that provides *Mayombe* with a "concrete historical situation, a datable and locatable frame" which Schipper (1989:133) maintains are the "conditions for the realization of realism". As aforementioned, the comprehensiveness of the story is a result of Pepetela's own involvement in this historical struggle as he was a member of the MPLA. Pepetela was actually a teacher in Dolisie and participated in guerilla activity in Cabinda (Peres, 1997:72). This fact lends authenticity to the narrative. His detail in description is another realist element in the text. These passages are successful in capturing the setting. An example of such a passage is one that describes the Mayombe forest:

The forest made ropes at men's feet, made cobras in front of men, the forest generated impassable mountains, wild animals, storms, foaming rivers, mud, darkness. Fear. The forest opened up pits camouflaged with leaves under the feet of men, immense noises in the silence of night, smashed trees down on men. And the men went on. The men turned green, and from their arms sprouted leaves, and flowers, and the forest curved into a vault, and the forest offered them its protective shade, and fruits (1983:51-52).

These descriptions, however, are not merely arbitrary. They are vital for the understanding of the guerillas' ambivalent feelings toward the forest. Being in this forest was life threatening and, so, instilled in the guerillas fear, but at the same time it sheltered them from their enemies and provided their nourishment, so they also felt safe.

The question that remains, however, is: which of the categories expounded on by Lukács does *Mayombe* fit in? For Lukács, naturalism was a banal recounting of facts, which included superficial descriptions. As seen in the analysis of Pepetela's descriptive passages above,

Mayombe does not consist of arbitrary descriptions, but descriptions that are subordinate to actions. They are almost always an important part in revealing more about the characters:

Clouds piled up over the forest, before them. The forest collects clouds, Fearless thought... An isolated cloud has the individuality granted to it by its mass that coheres and is valued for its weight, for its savage potential. Fearless identified with a grey cloud, with white wisps, that scudded in constant revolution, and seemed capable of escape, of passing alongside the mass of clouds that thickened over Mayombe. With beating heart he followed the frantic movements of the cloudlet that was now a bird, now a light, now the curls of a blonde woman, now a galloping horse. Inside himself he prayed for it to pass to the side of the threatening mass that drew it invincibly. For some moments, it seemed to him that the cloud would pass alongside and would freely follow its precipitate route. But either through a gust of wind or the attraction, the reality was that the cloudlet was swallowed by the dark-grey mass and broke up in it. A tug at his heart and a gesture of despondency accompanied his voice... (1983:86-87).

This description of the movements of a cloudlet through the sky is written in the context of a discussion on unity within the command. When Fearless observes this cloud, he identifies with it, as he is such an independent individual. The extent to which he values his individuality is shown when he is apprehensive about the cloudlet actually becoming part of the huge mass. He even prays (which is a major issue for a self-confessed atheist) that the cloudlet escapes the cloud mass. Losing its individuality and joining the mass, is what is inevitable, so that it can have “weight” and “savage potential”. This is also true of a revolution situation. It is a necessity to lose one’s individuality to exert a potent influence that is only possible through unity.

This leaves us, then, with either critical realism or socialist realism. As already established at the beginning of this study, the main difference between these two types of realism is that they deal with socialism in different ways. Critical realism deals with this issue from the outside while the opposite is true of socialist realism. Socialist realism uses the socialist perspective to describe “forces working towards socialism from the inside” (Lukács 1963:93). It is this condition of

socialist realism that is most evident in *Mayombe*. In the ensuing paragraphs, I shall endeavour to show that *Mayombe* exhibits certain distinguishable characteristics of socialist realism.

For Lukács, what is important about socialist realism is its ability to portray from the inside those that are devoted to the building of a different future (1956:95-96). According to Brenda Cooper, it is because of Pepetela serving with the MLPA guerillas that the novel is “distinguished by its insider’s view” (1992:133). The particular group being focused on in *Mayombe* is the MPLA guerillas. They are committed to seeing the Portuguese government overthrown and independence to emerge. Their lives are changed by their very involvement in the struggle. These changes are both positive and negative and, by portraying both, Pepetela is able to achieve a comprehensive view of society. This is the mark of a great realist writer, that is, to be able to portray clearly the complexities of society:

The great realist writer is alone able to grasp and portray trends and phenomena truthfully in their historical development... Men are changed by forces in their environment... Yet only the greatest realists are equipped to understand and portray their complexity (Lukács 1956:56-57).

Changes in individuals, which are most notable, are those in the lives of Theory, the Commander and the Commissar.

Pepetela is also able to achieve significance in the Lukácsian sense, as he shows characters “grappling with the most abstract issues of the time as their own vital and personal problems” (1978:154). Such an issue is the one on race, which is the result of the human tendency or need to categorize everything. One cannot escape the racial issue when a country has been colonized. This is an especially sensitive issue when that country is on the brink of independence. In a place where being white makes you the “oppressor” and being black means you are the “oppressed”, then being mixed leaves one in a state of confusion. Theory is portrayed, at the beginning of the novel, as one who cannot come to terms with his identity as a man of mixed race. He is plagued

by the fact that he bears in him “the original sin of a white father” (1983:9). The conflict within this individual is portrayed thoroughly using the intrusive narrative that delves into the thoughts of specific characters. This identity complex drives him to volunteer for extremely dangerous assignments against his better judgment, as he felt compelled in the light of his “difference”. Fearless, the Commander, picks up on this “colour complex” and encourages Theory. This allows Theory to overcome his insecurity about his race and, so, a positive change takes place in his life.

Tribalism is another one of those abstract issues. In fact, tribalism is one of the major issues running through the narrative:

In *Mayombe*, the central issue of debate among the guerillas is that of tribalism and the formidable challenge facing Angolans in trying to surmount it (Trump 1990:43).

Tribalism was one of those issues that had allowed colonialists to divide and rule the colonized people. In order to mount a successful revolution, a colonized country would need to overcome tribalism and exhibit unity. But even after independence, tribalism still remains a stumbling block as is evidenced in the oath-swearing ceremony in *Petals of Blood*, which was used by politicians to gain popularity and gain the people’s vote. So, what Pepetela does is to show the reality of the revolution where tribalism remains a major hurdle in the achievement of unity. Various incidents in the novel reveal how characters read other character’s actions in the light of their tribal affiliations. For example, when one of the guerillas (Ungrateful) steals a hundred escudos from a workman, Fearless is very angry. Miracle sees this anger as a result of Fearless being of a different tribe than Ungrateful:

See how the Commander was so concerned about the hundred escudos of that Cabinda traitor? Didn’t you ask why, didn’t you wonder? Well I’ll explain. The Commander is Kikongo... Did you see his rage when he grabbed Ungrateful? Why? Ungrateful is Kimbundu, there you have the whole story (1983:33-34).

The narrative is littered with such illogical arguments. This argument is illogical because, before Ungrateful is caught out, Fearless explains why the stealing of the money was so serious a matter. Before knowing whom the thief is, he labels him a “counter-revolutionary” (1983:26). The struggle, however, gives the men common purpose and, so, aids them in putting aside their tribalism. This is one of the positive outcomes of their involvement in the struggle. Towards the end of the novel, they do battle at “Fallen Branch” and defend one another regardless of tribal affiliation. They make the greatest sacrifice, that of their lives, for those who do not belong to their tribe:

Struggle, who was Cabinda, died to save a Kimbundu. Fearless, who was Kikongo, died to save a Kimbundu. It is a great lesson for us comrades (1983:213).

This spirit of unity is foreshadowed in a previous chapter when the guerillas believe that the base has been invaded by the tuga. They band together to rescue those they think are in danger:

And what reinforcements! Did you see how they all came forward? They forgot their various tribes...That is the merit of the Movement, to have achieved this miracle of beginning to transform men (1983:177).

This change in the men is attributed to the Movement. These examples are illustrative of the way Pepetela is able to depict the abstract notions of tribalism, and subsequent transformation away from it, in an accessible, concrete way.

The presence of “types”, as has been mentioned before, is an essential part of socialist realism. Realism gives rise to new typology for each new phase in the evolution of society (Lukács 1956:30-31). The struggle for liberation represents a transitory phase in Angolan history. Certain types emerged as a result of the forces at work within Angolan society at that specific time in history. Throughout the narrative, characters comment on “types”. For example, when Fearless describes how three freedom fighters (“types” he calls them) would respond if captured (1983:106-107). However, these are not the types that Lukács is referring to. The types he means

are the characters in the realist text. The characters in *Mayombe* are typical of those found in revolutionary movements engaged in a liberation struggle. However, they are not merely representative, because they have been shaped by forces (such as tribalism) operating specifically within the Angolan context. What enhances the idea of typicality is the lack of the guerillas' real names, except the Commissar, which is quite strategic. The implications of this will be dealt with in the latter part of the chapter.

Theory, as discussed before, is representative of those who are faced with an identity crisis in a society that places high value on origin. He is also representative of those who have had to make extreme personal sacrifices so that they could fight in the war:

I ran away from her, did not see her again made my choice alone, shut up in the house, in that house where soon there would be a child living, crying and laughing. I never saw that child, will never see the child. Nor Manuela. My story is of an alienated man who alienates himself in the hope of finding freedom (1983:6).

Theory leaves behind a lover and an unborn child to become a freedom fighter. This is a tremendous personal sacrifice. He is haunted by her image. Fearless is also haunted by his lover's image, Leli. She appears just before combat. He feels guilty about leaving her because when he left, she sought him and eventually died:

As they went to attack the Post at Miconje, Leli's image had appeared...Once more Leli's eyes, at once vengeful and tender, accused him of a thousand crimes...This was your revenge, to win me back in order to abandon me in the knowledge that I was once more your captive. Your pride all of your pride, limitless pride, which sacrifices everything (1983:36-37).

New World is the political visionary, which is a vital element in a liberation struggle. As a result, he sees everything in political terms even, the relations between people:

The commander is basically no more than a petty bourgeois dilettante, with anarchist trimmings. Though trained in the Marxist school, he retained from his class origin a good dose of anti-communism, which he shows in his refusal of proletarian equality. It is with poor grace that he accepts the democracy that must prevail between fighters and, sometimes, sudden acute crises of irrational tyranny. As a verbal defender of the right to revolt, a devotee of permanent contestation, he abuses his position as soon as the contestation is against him. The case of VW exposed all his dictator's mentality. This flagrant abuse of power led the Commissar, who has a more enlightened ideological training, to take a stand in favor of the mass line (1983:84).

The Commander's harsh dismissal of VW is seen as highly political. There is a simple reason for the Commander's reaction, that is, he was really disappointed that his judgment of VW was wrong, that he was not brave after all, that he acted only because of a bet. Andre, of course, is typical of those who sabotage the war for personal gain. The Commander tries to figure out Andre's motive for not supplying the base with food:

Go there and see why a bureaucrat sabotages the war! Maybe because the war leads to the training of more cadres, who may one day replace him... Maybe because things must be done within rules that he made for himself and that he cannot adapt in any way. Who knows! I don't understand either. Since he does not keep the money for himself, but squanders it on women. He squanders enough on them, and has a string of lovers they say. But he should take the money from other less fundamental sections, so that the war should not suffer from his night life. That is what any dishonest but intelligent type would do. Not he (1983:109).

There are those that are part of the struggle merely to get what they can. These people are often placed in key positions. All of these typical characters are products of the different pressures/forces operating on the struggle. They are saved from being merely abstract characters by Pepetela's intrusive narrative technique, which allows the reader to understand the thoughts and feelings of characters. Basically, it allows the reader to gain insight as to what informs that

particular character's perspective. Lukács' prescription, then, could aptly be applied to Pepetela's characters:

Yet, though typical, they are never crudely 'illustrative'. There is a dialectic in these characters linking the individual – and all accompanying accidentals- with the typical (1956:122-123).

In short, these characters (types), in *Mayombe*, embody a general social trend within a specific socio-historic time frame, all the while remaining individuals. Fearless, for example, is a hero in this socialist novel. Yet, he does not refrain from expressing his disillusionment at socialism after the independence:

Well! We will take power and what will we tell the people? We are going to build socialism. But this will take thirty or fifty years. At the end of five years, the people will begin to say: but such socialism has not solved this and that problem. And it will be true, since it is impossible to solve such problems, in a backward country, within five years (1983:93).

These statements may seem, on the surface, as ideological contradictions, however, they serve the function of enforcing the character's individuality. This hero, unlike Ngugi's hero in the previous chapter, does not endeavour to teach the reader. In this way, Pepetela is able to keep his characters from being "flat".

As aforementioned, the intrusive narratives are used to provide an inside view of a character's thoughts, feelings and motivations. But Fearless is not given an intrusive narrative. He is introduced as a strong, yet compassionate commander. We are left to judge for ourselves his character from what he says in dialogue with others and what others say and think about him. Fearless can be seen as the "revolutionary hero" in the novel. Clark describes the characteristics of this hero:

Minimally, the revolutionary hero was expected to lead an ascetic life of extraordinary dedication and self-deprivation...the hero should make the supreme sacrifice of his life, and this event was commonly followed by a secularized version of the Christian death-and –transfiguration pattern: the hero's "resurrection" in the ongoing movement, often symbolized by one of his comrades picking up the fallen banner (1981:49).

Fearless fits into this mould on many levels. Fearless is more aloof than any of the other guerillas and leaves Leli for the war. New World describes his unselfishness:

There he is, over there, among the youngsters, scraping himself on the forest roots, crawling, bashing his shoulders on the hard, rotten, damp soil of Mayombe, making himself hoarse with shouts...there he is, over there among the youngsters, teaching what he knows, unreservedly, giving himself to his pupils...Fearless is unselfish, he gave his spare shirt to the guide, who ran off with it...(1983:61).

At the end of the novel, he does make the "supreme sacrifice", when he tries to protect the Commissar. His death is followed by the Commissar taking over the role of Commander and, thus, fulfills the "resurrection" motif.

Cooper sees Fearless as Pepetela's creation of an African Prometheus. This is, according to her, a flaw in the novel. She argues that this creates tension in the novel, as Pepetela attempts to create a new myth while relying on the old (1992:136). However, one may argue that the Prometheus myth is merely used as a tool - something that can easily be identified with. It is merely something on which to build. The other "tension" that Cooper picks up on, is the creation of Fearless as man-God:

Pepetela attempts to subvert the superstition about the power of the gods so as to empower the men, but he does so contradictorily by creating a man-God, thus reinforcing the framework of the superhuman in contrast to ordinary people...(1992:137).

This analysis fails to take into account the obvious shortcomings of Fearless that are exposed throughout the novel, and it is, therefore, inaccurate. Fearless is, indeed, shown to be a heroic figure, but he is not without faults. In fact, the narrative goes to great lengths to expose them. His worst flaw is his treatment of women. This is revealed through his memory of Leli, who accuses him of winning her back just for the sake of knowing that she was his:

This was your revenge, to win me back in order to abandon me in the knowledge that I was once more your captive (1983:37).

It is clear from these lines that it is Fearless' philosophy that women were to be conquered as if in a battle. In fact, he actually advises the Commissar that a "woman must be constantly won" (1983:74) and, in this way, objectifies women. His disrespect of women is also seen when he unreservedly strokes the serving girl's buttocks in the bar (1983:156). Ondine is possessed with sexual potential that only Fearless can unlock; she is described as a "volcano" (1983:171). She is nothing more than a sexual object to Fearless, as no element of her personality is mentioned, even after sleeping with her. The narrative shows that the Commissar trusts him, yet Fearless has no problem betraying that trust and having sex with the woman he had just been engaged to. These womanizing and untrustworthy characteristics are no basis for the man-God, proposed by Cooper above, because man-God would imply perfection.

It is the Commissar, however, that is the positive hero in the novel. He is second in command to Fearless and has great respect for him. He learns to become a man because of the events that take place with Ondine. Fearless is the Commissar's mentor. Fearless grows very fond of him. He struggles to keep a neutral stance when it comes to him because of his feelings for him. Fearless is able to see the potential for greatness inside of the Commissar. He describes him as going through a metamorphosis when he is wounded by Ondine's indiscretion. He is, as mentioned earlier, the only guerilla in the group to have his real name revealed. This is so because the reader needs to see him not merely as one would see a romantic hero but, as a human being. He is human and he changes.

The weakest part of the characterization is the portrayal of women:

Pepetela is steering a precarious boat in treacherous waters, nowhere more apparent than in the novel's depiction of women (Cooper 1992:135).

As mentioned earlier, Fearless, one of the novel's heroes, objectifies women. Women are either depicted in sexual imagery or they are visions that "haunt" the guerillas before combat, such as Fearless' dead lover, Leli and Theory's abandoned lover, Manuela. Ondine is a schoolteacher who is only known through her relation with men. She is, firstly, the Commissar's fiancée, then she is the woman who committed an immoral act with Andre and, lastly she is Fearless' lover. No information is given about her past or her motives for becoming a part of the movement. Her reasons for being with the abovementioned men are also quite fickle. It would have enhanced the comprehensiveness of the novel, had there been adequate portrayal of female figures.

The ideological content of a novel plays an integral role in determining what kind of literature it is. Throughout the narrative, guerillas discuss the need for the people to be educated about why they are struggling. This is important in the socialist sense, as it is indicative of the all-important change of consciousness. There is a very real need to educate the proletariat. Their mission is successful as the mechanic volunteers to join the movement towards the end. Their success seems to be measured in the conscientizing of the people as observed in Fearless' statement before dying:

The mechanic, do you remember? The one we captured...He came to join us...The working class is joining the struggle...We are already winning...(1983:211).

If the people are educated then the momentum of the movement will be a natural result. There are however, conflicts between intellectuals and non-intellectuals. When Struggle refuses to study, an argument between him and New World ensues. Struggle believes that it is unnecessary for him to study, as he is "just a guerilla" (1983:57). New World argues that even those in the army need to be educated, to ensure stability of the post-independence government. If the army

is not educated, according to New World, there would be “coups d’etat every year, like in the other African countries” (1983:56). There are, also many more conflicts between intellectuals, as evidenced when Fearless agrees with New World on the need to study, yet disagrees on the motives behind studying:

Anyone who does not want to study is an ass and therefore, the Commissar is right...So everyone must study, the principle aim of a genuine Revolution is to make everyone study. But comrade New World here is an innocent, since he believes there are some who study merely for the good of the people. It is this blindness, this idealism that causes the worst mistakes (1983:58).

These conflicts between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, as well as intellectuals, and intellectuals dispel the illusion of an ideologically united movement. This could be viewed as an attempt to show the inner workings of a movement such as the MPLA in as realistic light as possible. This is one of the main reasons that Pepetela published the novel, years after he had written it, that is, tensions in the novel (such as shown above), could have been used by MPLA enemies to discredit the movement, if it had been published before independence:

Responding to a comment that the novel might be politically dangerous for those readers who incorrectly view Sem Medo (Fearless) as an ideal, Pepetela explained that the hiatus between the writing and the decision to publish was due to the fact that the novel contained certain elements that, if interpreted incorrectly, might be potentially dangerous (Peres 1997:77).

The novel ends, as is characteristic of social realist novels, on a positive note. The commissar completes his metamorphosis. He is, according to Peres, “an intellectual of peasant origin who comes of age in *Mayombe*” (1997:76). A metamorphosis indicates a new beginning. It is the shedding off of the old and the embracing of what is new. Although the Commissar is referring to himself in the novel one cannot help but make inferences about the nation of Angola after this liberation stage. It may seem as if too much is being read into the Commissar’s metamorphosis,

but Clark makes it explicit in her argument on the role of socialist realism, that this is the function of the positive hero:

The novel takes as its focus a relatively modest figure...However modest he may be, the phases of his life symbolically recapitulate the stages of historical progress as described in Marxist-Leninist theory (1981:10).

At the beginning of the novel, he does not fully assert himself. After being hurt/ betrayed by the woman he loves, he begins to emerge as a strong leader. After the eventual death of Fearless, he comes to a realization- that he has now changed. In the same way, the people of Angola were content. Then colonization took place and the very people they thought they could trust, actually wronged them by stealing from them. The people realize their betrayal and there was an uprising. This uprising proves instrumental in bringing enlightenment to all who are involved. It is also very revealing about the Commissar on a personal level. According to Tertz, this is a general trend in Soviet novels:

A large part of Soviet literature is an “educational novel” which shows the communist metamorphosis of individuals and entire communities (1960:47)

I would extend this analysis to include African literature, in the light of the two previous novels dealt with in chapters one and two. However, although this may be an educational novel, Cooper asserts:

It is also deeply opposed to one-dimensional political platitudes, dogma and easy solutions (1992:133).

The socialist perspective of the novel is not presented in the dogmatic way as has been argued with regard to *Petals of Blood*. Socialism is not seen as the magical cure for the country's ills after independence. While socialism may be necessary, there is an indication of the complex problems that continue to exist that are not susceptible to a “quick-fix”:

Trying to make a country independent, completely independent, is the only humane course of action. For that, socialist structures must be made, I agree. Nationalization of mines, land reform, nationalization of the banks, of foreign trade, etc.,etc. I know that, it is the only solution. And at the end of a certain time...the living standard will rise. Without doubt that is an advance, and so far agree, no need for further argument. But let us not call that socialism, because it is not necessarily so. Let us not call it a proletarian State, because it is not. Let us demystify the terms...there will not be democracy, there will be necessarily, inevitably, dictatorship over the people. This might be necessary, I do not know. I do not see another way, but it is not ideal, that I do know. Let us be honest with ourselves (1983:95).

This copious argument warrants quoting, as it shows the extent to which Pepetela is attempting to demystify “the rhetoric attached to the aims of the struggle” (Trump 1990:44). This may be interpreted as a realistic portrayal of the transitory phase of a country that has newfound independence.

There are subtle indicators toward the eventual success of the movement in attaining its goal of liberation. The novel, as a whole, is not naively utopian, as shown above. However, the aesthetic value of the novel is compromised at the very end in the depiction of Fearless’ death:

His death at the end of the novel is entirely unbelievable. Despite the blood pouring out of his belly, he barely grimaces in pain. He dies with a vision of the mechanic who joins up, and the message that “The working class is joining the struggle...We are already winning...”This has overtones of the worst kind of one-dimensional, overtly political writing, of which *Mayombe* is by and large free (Cooper 1992:138).

This flaw at the end does not, however, cancel out the complexity with which the rest of the novel is written. *Mayombe* brings about awareness on the subject of nationality. The narrative does not describe a utopian socialist society as a result of independence, but it creates debate around sensitive issues such as tribalism, mixed race and millennial rhetoric (Trump 1990:44).

As shown in this chapter, *Mayombe* is a socialist realist text, but it is so in a much more complex and oblique way than either *God's Bit of Wood* or *Petals of Blood*. It is not prescription that Pepetela seems to be aiming for but, rather, a point of departure for further discussion.

CONCLUSION

On examination of Lukács' arguments on realism, it was found that he views the ideology of the writer as a determining force that shapes a work of art:

It is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work that counts. It is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world, which constitutes his 'intention', and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing (Lukács 1956:19).

In the case of the novels studied, it has been shown that this assumption is not baseless. Pepetela has been involved with the communist MPLA movement. According to Peres, he served as an MPLA guerilla (1997:67). Both Sembéne Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are easily identified by critics as Marxist writers. For example:

In modern critical parlance, writers like Ousmane Sembéne and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are novelists of the Marxist school of writers...(Nnolim 1992:50).

It is quite evident that all the authors share a Marxist perspective and, so, it follows that their works are informed by Marxist ideology. As a result of this, Sembéne, Pepetela and Ngugi may see themselves as organic intellectuals who speak on behalf of workers and peasants. Despite this notion of representation being a highly contentious issue, the fact remains that they write from the point of view of workers and peasants:

God's Bits of Wood, *Petals of Blood* and *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* are taken here as examples of socialist art. Other novels, which fit into the category, are Sahle Sellassie's *Firebrands*, Pepetela's *Mayombe* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*. In all these novels the conflict is portrayed in terms of class, from the point of view of workers, peasants and other patriotic forces. In each story characters represent different classes and class interests as well as conflicting ideological standpoints (Ngara 1985:116).

Despite the shared ideology of the authors, each of the novels explored employs realism in a different way. Each novel has a different angle on the particular stage of independence of the country being depicted. The whole thrust of Ousmane's novel is that solidarity would bring on change that was inevitable - the inevitability of good triumphing over evil. *God's Bits of Wood* makes use of certain socialist realist elements, such as the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic (where the novel as a whole suggests a movement from spontaneity to consciousness), typical characters, an inside portrayal of the oppressed and, of course, a positive projection of the future. It is the creative and imaginative way that these elements are fused together that contributes to the success of the novel, even though it exhibits a naturalist style at times. Another thing that separates it from the other two novels is the emphasis on the communal sense of solidarity. The result is that the entire community is made out to be the hero.

The main focus of *Petals of Blood* is the political corruption in a post-independence country. The message, however, seems to be that, by raising people's consciousness, these problems could be rectified. *Petals of Blood* could be labeled formulaic. The elements of socialist realism are all present. The typical characters, the positive hero and mentor relationship, and a socialist perspective are all there. But it is this very perspective that adversely affects the aesthetic value of the novel, rendering it as illustrative literature because of the didactic nature of the novel. In fact, Ngugi's preference for Marxist literature, and the socialist realist form in particular, are made quite plain by his statement:

I would single out Lenin's work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* as an eye-opener on the nature of imperialism and its colonial and neo-colonial stages. Even today I think that this work ought to be compulsory reading for all students of African and Third World literatures. My first exposure to Marxist literature at Leeds University was through many of the public lectures organized by the students outside the formal academic mainstream. Writers of progressive imaginative literature – people like Brecht and Gorky – were also important to me. Gorky's novel *Mother* should be read by all African Patriots (Sicherman 1990:23).

This quotation from Ngugi certainly provides one with insight when trying to explain the rigid adherence to socialist realist structure in *Petals of Blood*. Ngugi's novel vastly differs from *Mayombe*, which seems to resist the use of formula. The conflicts that the individual has within himself, as well as those conflicts between the individual and society, are the focus of *Mayombe*. The psychological and social effects of the resistance struggle are explored in this novel.

It is therefore, *Mayombe* which proves most difficult to categorize. It does employ the realist technique and the socialist perspective, yet somehow escapes the label of socialist realism. One could classify *Mayombe* as a polyphonic novel. This term was used to describe Mikhail Bakhtin's assessment of Dostoevsky's novels:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels (1984:6).

The term polyphonic is rooted in a musical metaphor where there is more than one voice (Bakhtin, 1984:22). It has been noted in this study that Pepetela uses a very interesting form of narration, where the omniscient narrator is disrupted by an intrusive narrator. This allows for several different voices to come through. Each time this is done in *Mayombe*, the intrusive narrator identifies himself, for example: "I, THE NARRATOR, AM NEW WORLD." (1983:83). This is parallel to Bakhtin's view of Dostoevsky's realism that is based on the affirmation of someone else's "I" (1984:10). In short, Dostoevsky would write in such a way that he would transform characters from shadows of the writer's consciousness to an "authentic reality" (Bakhtin 1984:10). However, this technique is not included as mere variety, it is there as a means of interrogating certain ideals, one of which is socialist utopia. Authorial ideology is not necessarily a character's ideology. This is a feature of the polyphonic novel:

The consciousness of a character is given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, it is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness (Bakhtin 1984:7).

Providing different sides of relevant debates led to the success of *Mayombe* because issues that were raised in the novel seem to have been valid. One such issue is that of tribalism. Pepetela has been vindicated by history, as tribalism and the lust for power have made the war in Angola a drawn out affair.

The use of realism has enabled Ngugi, Pepetela and Sembéne to provide an accurate analysis of society. However, writing within the socialist perspective, it is also required of them to make future projections. This often results in visions of utopia usually locatable at the end of the narrative. *God's Bits of Wood* does this in a subtle way. After winning the strike, Maimouna can be heard singing of the battle being won:

*From one sun to another,
The combat lasted,
And fighting together, blood-covered their enemies.
But happy is the man who does battle without hatred* (1960:245)

The song is symbolic of the struggle they had just been through. Despite all of the under-handed tactics of the employers, the workers, who were in the right, were victorious. One would be reading too much into this ending, if one were to further analyze this ending. *Petals of Blood*, on the other hand, ends with what can be described as utopian revelry. Ngugi starts off by denouncing the evils of imperialism and capitalism, and then goes on to assure the reader that tomorrow the workers would be the ones wielding power (1982:344).

As mentioned in the analysis of *Mayombe*, it is a socialist realist text in an oblique way. Therefore, it is quite out of character, in the light of the entire novel that constantly strives to dispel the myths of socialist utopia, when Fearless is about to die, he has the progress of the resistance in mind. He comments on the working class joining the struggle and that they were "already winning" (1983:211). Then there is the Commissar's epilogue that elicits the theme of change. It almost seems as if Pepetela stuck these bits in at the last minute in order to make his

stance clear – as a preventative measure of sorts- just in case, through all of the conflicts (interpersonal and extra personal) about what the reader would not be sure where to throw in his/her lot.

What Pepetela does not do, however, is slip into arbitrary naturalism. This has been a negligible but observable characteristic in *Petals of Blood* and a distinguishable feature of Ousmane's novel. It has been noted, in Chapter Four, that *Mayombe* contains descriptive scenes that are subordinate to actions. In *Petals of Blood*, descriptive scenes are important, as Ngugi constantly switches time. Even though the reader is always made aware of the switch, it is my contention that Ngugi endeavours to create the correct environment of that particular time. The influence of Zola's *Germinal* on *God's Bits of Wood* was also examined, and that, may be the contributing factor in Ousmane's naturalist style in his descriptive passages. However, it is also duly noted that because realism strives to create art as close to the truth as possible, detailed descriptions are very necessary and these may be unfairly dismissed as naturalism. This is an understandable error, because of the overlap between realism and naturalism and the lack of a core theory on both accounts.

Despite apparent flaws within the three texts, what has been proved is their ability to mirror social, political and economic changes relative to their respective countries at a specific time in history. This was rendered possible through the use of realism and specifically socialist realism. It is in this sense that *God's Bits of Wood*, *Mayombe* and *Petals of Blood* can act as a point of departure for social analysis. However, social analysis is only valid if one is critical. Being critical with regard to uprising, and creating debates around liberation movements, is an important task of the writer. Serote's assertions on the role of the writer can easily be applied here, even though he is making a comment specifically on liberation movements:

It becomes the role of the writer to play a role where, on the one hand, you can look at the under-developed sections of our movement and be able to deal with them truthfully. And

look at the highly developed elements of our movement and also deal with them truthfully... So there is also that role that which the writer has to play...(Trump 1990:47).

Even though it provides social analysis, *Petals of Blood* is too obvious in its illustrative purposes to be considered a critical social analysis. Although *God's Bits of Wood* is somewhat more balanced; it does not provoke debate around pertinent issues. Therefore, one is inclined to consider a text such as *Mayombe* as more progressive in comparison with *God's Bits of Wood* and *Petals of Blood*, because it acts as a point of departure for further discussion on contentious social issues, and seeks both reality and truth without the ideological imposition upon the reader.

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