



Baloi ke Bao! The witch in Lauri Kubuitsile's *But Deliver us from Evil*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to employ realism to analyse how Lauri Kubuitsile depicts witchcraft in her novel *But Deliver us from Evil* (2019). The text focuses on the familiar topic of missionary influence during the colonial period in Africa and makes an analysis on how the character drives the realist argument in the text. The paper seeks to uncover how realism gives this novel a unique insight into early Tswana beliefs on the influence of witchcraft especially from the point of view of female characters.

Keywords: realism, witchcraft, traditional beliefs

Introduction

Witchcraft is not a new topic among writers of Botswana Literature, and several have touched upon this subject in one form or another (Dow 1995; Lopang, 2010; Head 1976.) Kubuitsile's *But Deliver Us from Evil* (2019) focuses on the lives of two girls from different backgrounds who are affected in unique ways by witchcraft but who are themselves gifted with an ability that borders on the supernatural. The paper will give a brief theoretical analysis of realism. It shall start off by giving a brief overview on how Georg Lukacs views realism. This attempt will include his notions on naturalism and critical realism. The paper will also compare realism with modernism as both approaches take opposing views on the individual and society. Thereafter, the paper shall go into a textual analysis of *But Deliver us From Evil*.

Realism

Realism as a form of writing gained traction during the eighteenth century and one of its scholars, Ian Watt, states realism as "the most original feature of the novel form" (1957:11). This in no terms makes it an easy literary field to define because, as Gaylard puts it (2010) it has a "genre-defying elasticity and multiplicity." (p278). As a literary theory, realism, had some strong characteristics that set it apart from earlier forms of prose writing. These characteristics included a vivid depiction of the character's environment, an adherence to a time scale and characters that were unique with a background that was well fleshed out (Watt 1957). Earlier forms of prose writing tended to be somewhat straight jacketed into using plot templates from mythology and history and as such the aspect of originality of plot was lacking.

Georg Lukacs (1885-1971) in "The Ideology of Modernism" is both a defender of realism as well as a critique of modernism. This critique is influenced by (but not limited to) the way modernists depict the human character. Lukacs states that human characters as presented by modernist writers are "by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings" (1964:20) Essentially, the characters seem like they have cocooned themselves against social interaction, promoting a debilitating sense of individualism. Thus, individuals in this state of representation lack a certain fluidity or dynamism that will enable them to not only cope with their surroundings but to act on it and flourish. Thus, the writer who does justice to his work must incorporate a 3D picture of man and his surroundings. It is thus apparent that a major handicap of Modernism, for Lukacs, is that it sees a character as independent of his surroundings. In "Studies of European Realism" (1964), Lukacs asserts, "the true great realism depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing one or the other of their aspects...realism means a three dimensionality, an all roundness that endows with independent life, characters and human relationships." (p.6). It is for this reason that Lukacs promotes the concept of 'Type'. This is akin to the foundation on which realist literature is built.

Lukacs argues that a style of work is heavily influenced by the ideology that underpins that work. In other words, how one writes is influenced by how that author views the world around him/her. As such writing stems not from a vacuum but from lived experiences that inform and guide a piece of prose writing. Lukacs in his article, *Man and Objective Truth* states that,

"The basis for any correct cognition of reality whether of nature or society is the recognition of the Objectivity of the external world, that is, its existence independent of human consciousness. Any apprehension of the external world is nothing more than a reflection in consciousness of the world that exists independently of consciousness " (p.25)(AOT)

This lays the premise on how the artist in prose fiction reflects his/her reality. It is this reflection of reality that some scholars may term mimesis or imitation. Lukacs states that 'the theory of reflection is nothing new in aesthetics' (p74 MEA). What needs to be understood is that though reflection conjures up images of a mirror it means far more than imitation to show how objective social reality is a 'dialectical' reflection. In other words, a dialectical reflection details how man engages with his surroundings. To borrow the Aristotelian concept, man is "zoon politikon" (a social animal) and as such Realism shows man as part of, rather than aloof of his environment. This concept of engagement is at variance with that of Modernism which sees man as an asocial being and Naturalism which states that man is at the mercy of his environment. Realism thus sees a symbiotic relationship between man and his surroundings such that depicting a work of fiction is not a passive reflection of life that is static but one that is dynamic and symbolic of a society in flux. Therefore, if a writer engages with his environment the ideal outcome is to influence change upon that system – a particularly relevant scenario given the Marxist's duel with capitalism.

Realism talks about 'type' in literary aesthetics and this is important in achieving a concise representation of the human condition. For Lukacs, the concept of type "permits a resolution of the dialectic between reality and appearance; it provides a link to the social and historical processes of which the best realistic art provides an accurate reflection" (p.79 MEA). It is thus important that the character has to be presented in a way that echoes the social conditions of the time. It is mimesis but far more than that. It is a process of faithfully representing that which is around you, no matter how uncomfortable or disturbing this is. The realist writer does not fence sit. Through the representation of a character's relationship with the world, a fulfilling picture of our place in the world is reflected in the literary realm.

The paper will look at setting and characterisation though with the knowledge that the two are not mutually exclusive. In terms of setting, the novel shows how rain or the lack of it, is an integral part of Tswana discourse. In Botswana the word, 'pula' is both a national toast as well as the name of the country's currency. With this in mind, the importance of rain to Botswana cannot be overemphasised (Schapera 1930; Comaroff 1991). Consequently, the absence of good rainfall is something that bodes ill for a community who rely on it for crop farming and animal rearing. Likewise the presence of rain is seen as a blessing or a harbinger of good news. In *But Deliver Us from Evil*, the prevailing drought is seen by the chief that something evil is afoot. It justifies the presence of witchcraft in the village. "The rains are bad time and again; cattle are dying. But now two men are dead. We must take serious action before it goes any further."(p.26). logically then, it is in everyone's interests to ensure that witchcraft is eliminated. To conflate drought with witchcraft is to give currency to the need to uproot it by death. The realism here asserts itself when one realises that among Botswana there is a strong correlation between witchcraft and rain (Gewald 2001) such that the absence of the latter is often blamed on the presence of the former. In the text as soon as Rra Nthebolang is thrown off the cliff, the mood of the villagers changes to optimism and it even takes on a celebratory atmosphere. "They are sure everything will be set right now. There is palpable relief. They think of their fat cows and the rain that will fall without stopping and make the world healthy and green again."(p27) Such reasoning helps to legitimise the killing of a man in that it will resuscitate the livelihoods of all. Such reasoning does not afford one the opportunity to introspect on the methods used to rid society of witchcraft. The end result overweighs the process so much as to make it seem irrelevant. The arrival of the missionary, Thomas Milner, at King Sechele's village, Ntsweng, is preceded by rain, something which is seen as a good omen by the villagers. In fact, 'the people think that means he's different from the other missionaries.'(p.78). The general consensus is that missionaries are unwelcome because they are associated with droughts. Interestingly, the author seems to equate witchcraft with missionary work in that both are seen as affecting the environment negatively.

Thus, there is a need to avoid missionaries in that, just like witchcraft, they cause disruption in communities by bringing in a way of life that is anathema to the beliefs and norms of the locals. Kgosi Sechele represents the double life that men like him must lead due to missionary contact. His belief in Christianity deems it illogical for him to believe in witchcraft. However, the people who look up to him for guidance and retribution, expect him to be unequivocal in his judgement. He thus, faces a dilemma between fulfilling the demands of his people and following the doctrines of the new faith. At the trials of Mma Motsumi, who has been accused of witchcraft, the burden on Kgosi Sechele's shoulders is clear as he addresses the crowd,

'This is a complicated case. I am a Christian. I have been baptised. If I am a Christian, they say, then I cannot believe that witchcraft exists. But as a child of this land, I know what can occur. How can I deny the evil that has been covering Ntsweng? I am beginning to understand that Christianity for us, for Africans, is different from the Christianity of the Europeans.'(p.256). In essence Christianity is part of the fabric of western culture, but for Kgosi Sechele, it has to find a way of co-existing with Tswana culture, but in this case this makes the two beliefs irreconcilable. The issue of witchcraft was not the only cultural challenge that Sechele faced. Historical records show that his conversion meant that he had to give up a polygamous lifestyle as well (Tlou and Campbell 1997). Toyin Falola states that getting Africans to renounce polygamy was part of a wider plan to make it easier for the Africans to adapt to a western lifestyle (Falola 2000). Related to this notion, Nkomazana (2016) asserts that the missionaries actively targeted chiefs for conversion. The idea was that if the leaders were baptised into the new religion, it would make it easier for the rest of the tribe to follow suit. This conversion, from the point of view of the missionaries, is a spiritual and cultural colonisation of the African (Magorian 1964; Latouche 1996). Kgosi Sechele battles to reconcile two very different ways of life and the trial at the kgotla meeting is at a deeper level a trial of Christian values versus indigenous beliefs. He says to the crowd, "We must adapt Jesus's words through our own eyes, taking into consideration our own lives and experiences, accepting that which is and cannot be denied. It would be irresponsible to leave my people vulnerable to the witches who so clearly live among us." (p.256). Kubuitsile's reflection of reality here is that the transition by chiefs from rejecting indigenous belief systems to embracing foreign cultures was not smooth. There was a lot of soul searching by disciples of the new faith and the chiefs had to make very tough decisions during tough political times as evidenced in the trial. Although Reverend Milner is present at the trial and despite his dismissal of witchcraft, Kgosi Sechele takes a different view and condemns Motsumi and Barobi to death, "Their punishment is death, to be carried out immediately."(p.257)

The text shows that locals and outsiders alike frown at witchcraft and its disruptive influence. However, the same can be said for Christianity. Thomas Milner, is the face of the Christian movement in Ntsweng. He is a man of the cloth but it quickly becomes apparent that he has his own motives for venturing into Africa. He has visions of grandeur but also a hunger to profit from the skirmishes between the boers and the indigenous folk by supplying guns and ammunition to the latter. He is presented as a sexual predator with an insatiable appetite for local maidens, a man of violent dispositions both in his lovemaking and in his physical confrontations with his wife, Beatrice. He is judgmental, surly, prone to moody spells and condescending. Korang (2011) asserts that, "what we can expect literary realism to typify in representation is man and woman in a concrete sociohistorical setting"(p.26) A good example of Milner's explosive temper is seen when he realises that Beatrice has fallen pregnant which now means that their departure for inland Africa will have to be put back. "Thomas Milner arrives at the small house red with fury. He picks Beatrice up and throws her to the ground. He punches her face. He screams at her. 'You black whore!' he bellows. 'You have ruined everything.'(p66). He is a man with no friends and plenty of enemies. Most importantly, his character depicts that not all missionaries were what they seemed to be. Kubuitsile presents the missionary as hypocritical, a sham, a person whose presence among the natives is not to bring a sense of spiritual anchor but disruption and upheaval. Realism thus exposes the confrontations, the episodes of soul searching and disruptions that characters experience with each other and with their surroundings. For the most part the locals are sceptical of missionary presence for the narrative states that, "Although missionaries have their uses, it's a known fact that they cause droughts."(p.78). Just like witchcraft, the inhabitants of Ntsweng would rather not have missionaries amongst them. It is thus understandable why these missionaries have their houses a far distance from the rest of the community. "The mission house is located at the far end of of the village. It's unique in being on its own, not part of the circles of the village."(p86). The physical distance between Thomas Milner's house and the other huts emphasises too the spiritual vacuum between the two groups.

Kubuitsile goes to great length to depict a typical housing system of the time, by explain how the social set up enhances kinship lines as well as depicting one's status or lack thereof. The depiction of the setting in this manner enables one to understand that communal living was not just a haphazard manner but was purposefully constructed to achieve aspects of identity and power relations. This becomes apparent to Beatrice who resides at the mission house that is , "not part of the circle of dwellings of which the village is made up. Later Beatrice will learn that each circle is a family; the leader of the family lives in the compound in the middle – the kgosana, the chief of that kgotla. And the status of the family members is decided by the distance of their house from their leader's house. The mission compound is separate from this system, an isolated place with no familiar connections."(p.86). Therefore, there is a correlation between location and acceptance. The fact that Nthebolang and her mother (who have sought refuge in Ntsweng after fleeing their village following accusations of witchcraft) stay in the mission compound and not in the village proper, says a lot about how the village of Ntsweng views them. This helps one understand Lukacs concept of Type in that writers should be able to depict the total human experience within a certain social context. This means giving a detailed description of the social environment as it is this which helps one understand the character dynamics at play in a piece of writing. Pishosta (2016) asserts that "True or critical realism requires that the writer not only depict segments or dimensions of reality that are immediately obvious, but also those aspects that are permanent and objectively more significant"(p.225-226).

The depiction of Beatrice as a character who is in tune with the social politics of Ntsweng is what differentiates her from and ultimately empowers her over Thomas Milner. She understand the social dynamics and sees opportunities where Milner only sees loss. For instance, she is quick to realise that her friendship with Nthebolang will enable her to escape Milner's abuse and start a new life elsewhere. She is aware that Nthebolang is also a person who feels like an outsider, who struggles to deal with the accusations of witchcraft placed upon her and her mother. In Nthebolang, Beatrice sees an allie. However, though Beatrice comes across as a hardened character who has endured the pains of, parental separation, forced adoption, arranged marriage and such, one gets the feeling that she is perhaps too mature for her years.

The novel does not really make it apparent why Beatrice has violent episodes that even go as far as murder. There is thus a disconnect between what we know of the character and what the character does in certain situations. Often it seems that the character's mind is far more mature than the body it resides in. The character at times is not believable. For instance, she kills the missionary John Anderson after she is told by one of her friends Kamogelo that he has been sexually abusing her for some time. Kamogelo is 10 years old and Beatrice is much younger, though she finds the courage to slit Anderson's throat while he sleeps. At the end of th murder the narrative states, "The metallic smell of blood fills the air and she wants to cry out, but then she thinks of Kamogelo, of her waiting in the bush for Beatrice's return. She must be courageous. There is no other option. This is nothing. A job that had to be finished and now it has been. John Anderson brought this on himself. A just punishment for his crime."(p.39). The protagonist grows out of the experiences of the environment, yet this growth has to be tempered by the realisation that the physicl exertions are governed by the mental development of the said character. Chukwumah (2015) asserts that "realism holds that literature, no matter the genre, bears versimilar indices and pointers to the socio-political and historical milieu out of which it springs and that a contract is entered into by the writer when he writes."(p24). What we see in Beatrice's character is at odds with this statement. It is thus very unlikely that a child younger than 10 can creep into a sleeping man's house and slit his throat without agonising over the action. Furthermore, that the child can then flee the scene without any form of remorse at all. Taking a person's life poses serious ethical concerns yet for the depiction of this character does not tease out these issues. The fictional world has to accurately represent the determinable world. Realist literature promotes what is plausible, it upholds what is sane. In the words of Gaylard (2010), "Fiction, if it is to be judged good, must present the illusion that it is liveable, that it feels like the world in which the reader lives, and hence the 'common denominator' quality of much realist fiction." (p282). This is not to say that Beatrice's character is ultimately porous, just that she matures too soon in the linear time frame in which the reader connects with her.

Conclusion

A combination of setting, indigenous naming and traditional belief systems contribute towards situating this text within the parameters of realism. *But Deliver us from Evil* plays on the native-foreigner interface to bring to light how characters tried to find their place as well as fight for their place at a time when the suspicion of witchcraft was a death sentence. The text though does not sugar coat the missionary presence among the indigenous people. Thomas Milner is a man with a dark heart and causes much harm, physical and emotional, on the people he comes across. Though the characters are generally strong, others like Beatrice have flaws where their actions do not quite gel with their age. The aspect of character development in relation to the linear aspect of time creates issues of believability at times. However, in terms of realism, *But Deliver us from Evil* is quite a solid read.

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