

MARECHERA

Meaning in the Shadows

*In his book, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, Toyin Falola poses the fundamental question of “How can Africa uplift itself?” in the wake of decolonization. This question of how Africa should proceed from colonization is one of the last ideological dilemmas of the modern world. Dambudzo Marechera, an African author of fiction and arguably Zimbabwe’s most important creative writer of the 20th century, attempted to solve the challenge.¹ This paper will contextualize his life within the larger history of Zimbabwe surrounding the governments of Ian Smith and Robert Mugabe, and show how his experiences manifested into a political philosophy that blended pacifism and individuality in favor of collective or nationalist identity.*

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In Juliet Okonkwo’s review of *The House of Hunger*, Marechera’s most famous work, she criticized his writing for its “tireless attempt to rake up filth” and “abundance of [the] obscene.”² While *The House of Hunger*, and all of Marechera’s writing, does contain what may seem to be a gratuitous amount of sex and violence, the Zimbabwe experienced by Marechera suffered from such depravity. However, it is true that Marechera occasionally embellished aspects of his life to fit within a more heroic narrative. For example, in an interview conducted by Alle Lansu, Marechera sensationalized the details of his father’s death. He claimed that the corpse “had been riddled with... heavy automatic bullets” that had “almost cut off a part of his body,” which the morticians sewed back on.³ He later attributed the shots to the Rhodesian Light Infantry, and thus placed himself at the center of the Rhodesian crisis through his father’s death.⁴ However, in another interview conducted by Flora Veit-Wild, he contradicted this assertion. In response to questions about his father’s death, Marechera suggested that his father was hit by a drunken driver during his walk home one night.⁵ Nevertheless, Marechera’s works do reflect his war-torn world and his poverty-stricken origins. Individual facts may be strategically altered in his works and interviews to endow his work with revolutionary credibility, but the overall atmosphere portrayed is representative of his world.

TANGWENA TO LONDON: EDUCATION AND EARLY WRITINGS

Homes in his Marechera’s neighborhood of Tangwena were constructed of “pole and daga” and “divided into two rooms.”⁶ Marechera’s own home lacked running water and electricity, and the walls were so thin one “could literally hear what was happening about two or three houses [over].”⁷ Despite his impoverished background, he obtained a scholarship to St. Augustine’s Mission and quickly became a star student. His hunger for books was so voracious that his English teacher and principal granted him access to their personal collections.⁸ When Marechera attended the University of Rhodesia, Ian Smith’s government increasingly intruded on college affairs. For example, Marechera reported that the size of the on-campus police force grew significantly, and student magazines were heavily censored. Charles Maenzanise, a peer

of Marechera, reported that “despite coming from the elite black schools,” black students felt like outsiders in “competition with white students.”⁹ The groups self-segregated to the point that the “situation would not allow [blacks] to get to know [whites].”¹⁰ After participation in a student protest against discrimination, Marechera was expelled.

With the help of his former teachers from St. Augustine’s and the University of Rhodesia faculty, Marechera secured a scholarship to New College, Oxford. He continued to be a troublemaker. Sir William Hayter, the Warden of New College at the time, stated that “in all [his] eighteen years at New College,” he never had a student who caused “so much trouble as [Marechera] did.”¹¹ Marechera’s increasingly disobedient behavior stemmed from his feeling torn between African and European cultures. In an interview with Fiano Lloyd in 1986, one year before his death, Marechera confirmed that he found Oxford’s traditions “disturbing” and indoctrinating.¹² At the same time, Marechera felt grateful for the safety and opportunity provided by Oxford; he reported feeling like a “black underdog fed from the hand of white academia.”¹³ The resulting psychological distress ultimately led to his expulsion when Oxford found him to be mentally unstable and Marechera refused to enter a therapy program.

Just as Zimbabwe emerged from colonization with a confused identity, Marechera’s education left him with a shattered sense of self. Greenwell Matsika, a peer at the University of Rhodesia, reported that Marechera “would display a passionate dislike of... the students who were selling UDI... and yet at times” be found “drinking with [them] or even begging for money from them.”¹⁴ As L.B. Rix, a lecturer in English at the University of Rhodesia wrote in a recommendation for Marechera, he was “caught between an African culture and a ‘European’ one and belong[ed] to strictly neither.”¹⁵ Marechera reflected on this frustration in *The House of Hunger*, when the protagonist lamented that he had been “severed from his own voice” due to the opposing languages of English and Shona.¹⁶ The character’s internal monologue was “an interminable argument, one side of which was always expressed in English and the other side always in Shona.”¹⁷

After expulsion from Oxford, Marechera remained in Britain and wrote his first works: *The House of Hunger* (1979), *The Black Insider* (published posthumously), and *Black Sun-*

light (1980). *The House of Hunger* received critical acclaim, and Marechera won the Guardian Fiction Prize for his debut novel. However, at the ceremony for award recipients, Marechera threw a tantrum due to a sense of betrayal to his home country. A *West Africa* magazine article entitled “Red Faces and Red Wine” reported that the “star of the show... [threw] a wine glass at a mirrored door” and later “sent a chair flying” across the hall.¹⁸ Marechera “spoke of himself” as “collecting prizes in London while his people were being killed Zimbabwe” as he “[threw] expensive-looking plates at a wall.”¹⁹ After this event, he was ostracized from British literary circles and remained in England for years without permanent residence.

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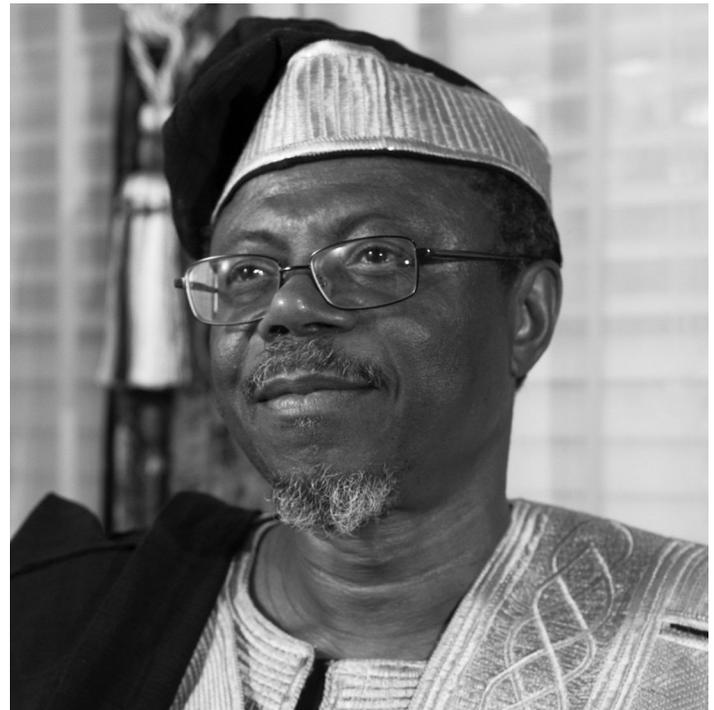
BOOKS AS PROTEST: THE CREATION OF MARECHERA’S PHILOSOPHY

While at the University of Rhodesia, Marechera expressed significant interest in political action and demonstration. However, he never found a leadership role among the student organizations due to his unpopularity and devastating stutter. In an interview in the 1980s, Marechera expressed that he had “wanted to become part of the national struggle” at the University of Rhodesia.²⁰ However, Marechera was disliked by his fellow students. When the principal of St. Augustine’s announced Marechera’s winning of the Alfred Beit scholarship to study at the University of Rhodesia during a school assembly, it was “greeted with a groan” from the senior class.²¹ The principal noted that he had never seen such a response before. His asocial behavior was exacerbated by his stutter. Linda Moss, a classmate one year ahead of Marechera at the University of Rhodesia, remembered that he “stuttered very, very badly” and consequently was “quite introverted” and “not particularly socially communicative.”²²

Marechera channeled his resistance in the form of writing. In answering the question, “Which writers influenced you?,” Marechera said that his “[influences] ranged from a few owners of grocery stores right through primary school teachers, priests, deranged leaders of fringe/esoteric religions, housewives, nannies... factory workers... pick-pockets, pimps... and of course, informers... the police reservists... the District Commissioner... the white schoolboys who’d beat [him] when [he] foraged among [their garbage].”²³ His writings were the embodiment of his experiences and the opinions that they produced—he expressed the “pain, betrayals,

MARECHERA’S ANSWERS

Marechera’s solution to the question of “How can Africa uplift itself?” rested on a rejection of European culture and a focus on the formation of the individual over the organization of the state. He criticized the contemporary visions for new Africa as artificial, unrealistic, and disingenuous. He rejected prior African intellectuals on the grounds that all culture and tradition is rhetoric and sophistry used by leaders to manipulate the masses; rather than ideology as a driving factor in history, Marechera concluded that *Realpolitik* explained political decisions. Because of the disastrous “results of politicians’ decisions” both in Rhodesia and in liberated countries, Marechera held an uncompromising distrust of politicians. After seeing the horrors inflicted by militaristic leaders, Marechera held that the very idea that someone was able to amass enough people and control thousands of people was horrifying. As a result, the possibility that majority rule by Africans would be disastrous in his opinion. Marechera believed that “culture... emphasized” in a “nationalistic way” led to fascism.²⁵

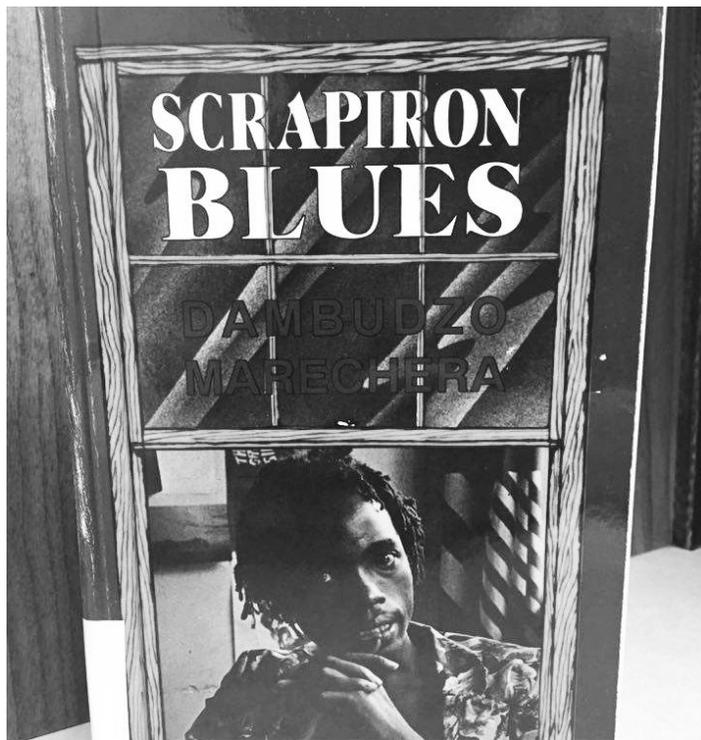


Chief Dr. Toyin Falola (2011)
Source: Koltron11 (Wikimedia Commons)

Marechera recognized the difficulties in reconciling differences across racial and socioeconomic lines, but his works provide ample cases of characters living harmoniously with those different from themselves, even if at times with frustration. He supported an education grounded in empathy as the means to create altruistic citizens who would build peaceful nations. While Marechera's work is notoriously enigmatic due to its streams of consciousness and relentless anger, a careful review of the works *The House of Hunger*, *The Black Insider*, *Black Sunlight*, *Scrapiron Blues*, and *Cemetery of Mind* elucidates a sophisticated and original political philosophy.

CRITIQUE OF THE WEST

Marechera's criticizes Western materialism for its superficiality and emptiness, and as a result equates the possibility of Africa adopting Western consumerism with genocide. In a short story entitled "Are There People Living There?" Marechera parodies the ideal English family. The story revolves around a writer who is drafting an article for a magazine "offering fantastic high sums of money for stories [about African families] with a Modern Africa slant."²⁶ An "informant" has told the writer that in order to win the prize, the "family must be seen to consume the products... of white civilization."²⁷ The writer goes on to muse that in his own home, occasionally his wife and he "would be invaded wholesale in [their] bed... [by] some giggling know-alls already there" due to the small, shared space of their home.²⁸ However, the narrator concludes that "[such frivolity] was not modern" and instead thinks of lifeless furniture and sterile familial relations for his story.²⁹



Scrapiron Blues, by Marechera (published in 1999)
Source: Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University

Because of these problems inherent in materialism, in the poem "A Writer's Diary in Harare" Marechera concludes that Westernization constitutes genocide. The poem's narrator introduces the concept of materialism as absurd when he states his "clothes have said/ Your body is out of fashion."³⁰ Moreover, when the narrator claims that "K&M fashion for me/ Beckons towards absolute solution," Marechera introduces the concept of Westernization as genocide through comparing materialism with Nazi Germany's "final solution."³¹ Marechera also criticizes European modernity on the grounds that Europeans objectify the human form and that any attempt to conform to European beauty will result in feelings of inferiority. During the first bar scene in *The House of Hunger*, the protagonist laments that the "walls were all plastered with advertisements for skin-lightening creams."³²

Marechera condemns European modernization on the basis of social stratification in his work *The Black Insider*. The main character complains that his native country "not only adapted very easily to the materialism of the West but also... inherited their kind of social class distinctions."³³ As a result, a "man's worth is measured by his wallet" ever since "independence was granted."³⁴

Marechera refused to accept a modernity in which Africa would always be inferior to and behind Europe. One of the older squatters in *The Black Insider* expresses that "from beyond the rim of the unknown, rose the... urge to consume... the beads and art trophies in the whiteman's bin."³⁵ Marechera suggests that without a clear sense of direction, Africans had hastily taken up an imperfect, white vision of modernity. The squatter then grieves that Africa now looks "into the mirror teaching [its] children the use of skin-lightening creams and psychoanalysts."³⁶ Marechera rejected a future that merely mimicked another culture.

Marechera's final criticism of Western modernity stems from its emphasis on violence. In *Black Sunlight*, the enigmatic character of Stephen, who "nobody quite knew what business [he] was involved in," symbolizes the militaristic influence of Europe on modern Africa through its supply of arms to soldiers and rebels. The members of the Black Sunlight Organization relate that "one day [Stephen said he was a] 'Consultant,'" and "another day it was something at the Stock Exchange."³⁷ The use of the word "consultant" is an unmistakable reference to the military aid sent by wealthier countries to support various groups during the Cold War. Within the specific context of Rhodesia, for example, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) received aid from China and the Soviet Union, respectively. In multiple instances, the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea even transported rebels out of Africa to train them at their own military bases.³⁸ The rebels in *Black Sunlight* later discovered that Stephen "dealt in weapons: rifles, grenades, pistols, gas canisters, [and] machine guns" despite his claim to be devel-



New College, Oxford, the location of Marechera's studies (2008)
Source: Olaf Davis (Wikimedia Commons)

oping government institutions such as the stock exchange.³⁹ Another rebel in *Black Sunlight* says they were “over-equipped” during the discussion of Stephen's functions.⁴⁰

REJECTION OF CONTEMPORARY VISIONS OF AFRICA

Marechera's works constitute a vehement protest against the contemporary versions of modernity that African countries were using to uplift themselves. In *The Black Insider* his protagonist states “it turned out that the African image which we ourselves were constructing” was “as false as...the white novelists' and poets' descriptions.”⁴¹ His works suggest that African countries are too diverse and heterogeneous to authentically unify under traditional forms of nationalism. The internal monologue of his main character in *The House of Hunger* fears that “our roots [had] become so many banners in the winds, with no meaningful connection” to the “deep-seated voice” within any one particular contributing entity.⁴² As Rhodesia was composed of multiple tribes, such as the Moshonas and the Matabeles, unifying the entire nation under one rigid creed would be unrealistic.⁴³

Marechera created the character of Solomon, the “township photographer,” whose “studio is papered from floor to ceiling with photographs of Africans in European wigs,” to express such distaste for African adoption of European ideals.⁴⁴ Solomon is disliked by the novel's protagonists, and the fact that the “background of each photo is the same: waves breaking upon a virgin beach” highlights the artificiality of Europeanization since Rhodesia was a landlocked country and therefore possessed no beaches.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the fact that Solomon is now wealthy confirms the fact that Marechera believes Africa had already adopted an inauthentic version of modernity.

Marechera also rejected proposals from African intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon. In *Black Sunlight*, Marechera introduces the character of “Franz's brother,” who is “always handing out pamphlets” and a clear symbol for the writings of Fanon.⁴⁶ The character presents oversimplified and distasteful views, such as when he equates the white race to the “great cunt” and repeatedly shouts “DOWN WITH THE GREAT C*NT!” into microphones.⁴⁷ Frantz Fanon is also critiqued in Marechera's poetry, such as when in the work “Throne of Bayonets,” Marechera writes “I hear Franz Fanon” shouting “WHEN! WHEN! WHEN!”⁴⁸ Throughout Marechera's works, Fanon's viewpoints are often capitalized and repetitive, suggesting a crudeness to his philosophy.

NATIONALISM AS RHETORIC

Due to the corruption Marechera saw during the rule of both white and black governments, he viewed ideals and tradition as tools used by leaders to manipulate the masses; *Realpolitik* was the driving force of decisions, and ideology was merely an illusion used to fool populaces. Marechera's works argue “culture, tradition, history [and] civilization” are “endoparasites which actually live permanently in [people's] minds.”⁴⁹

Marechera criticized justice delivered by the government as a charade. The wife of the protagonist in *Black Sunlight* proposes the “court room is just another stage in yet another theatre.”⁵⁰ She continues that “the tragedy is that people really think Justice-the most unique and sacred principle-is there in the court room,” and thus Marechera suggests that even the most revered principles of government are liable to corruption.⁵¹ During *The Black Insider*, Marechera also proposes tradition as a negative force. For example, a leader of the revolutionaries notes that “from the ugly face of tradition” there is “always somebody on the run.”⁵² In another instance, the narrator equates the “guillotine,” “an electric chair,” and a “noose” to the “implements of human tradition.”⁵³

In the unfinished novella *The Concentration Camp*, the omniscient narrator states the character Otto holds an “impractical idealism” since he “really believe[s]... the revolutionary pamphlets and speeches” that he writes.⁵⁴ The narrator believes that in truth such materials are produced because they are “necessary if the foreigners” are “to be convinced of the revolutionary sincerity”; another character remarks in the following passage that “after all, it's money that oils the wheels.”⁵⁵ As a result, Marechera argues that “there is no constitution, just consensus” that matters.⁵⁶

PACIFISM AND THE ABSURDITY OF WAR

As a result of his belief in *Realpolitik*, Marechera's works argue that all warfare lacks justification because it is a destructive rather than creative force. In *The Black Insider*, the narrator notes that the “fighting had been going on for a long time.”⁵⁷ So long, in fact, that no one could recall why the conflict had begun in the first place. Rather than even fighting along racial lines, the narrator states “things had suddenly become

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[so] complicated” that the war was “more like a kaleidoscope in which every little chink of color in the shaken picture was fighting every other little chink.”⁵⁸

Marechera viewed war as a force that robs future generations of leaders. A consistent theme in his works is the question of “Where are the bloody heroes?”⁵⁹ Marechera’s characters search for leadership and find none. The explanation for the absence of effective leadership is that “where once our heroes danced there is nothing but a hideous stain.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the fact Africans fought Africans meant that one person’s hero would be another’s enemy.

The revolutionary groups presented in Marechera’s works are typically lacking in character and ideology; they hold the same flaws and tendency towards violence as colonial governments. The Black Sunlight Organization is composed of “robbers... criminals... [and] swindlers... of all types.”⁶¹ The protagonist describes the organization’s treatment of people, whose presence and reason for being held are never explained, as torturous: “human figures were poised in very excruciating postures... Some dangled from chains fixed to the roof (One hung upside down and dangled by his testicles)... Some were on a red hot treadmill.”⁶² The group also lacks a specific platform, as the narrator notes the Black Sunlight Organization is composed of “endless fragmented leftwing parties.”⁶³ As a result of unprincipled wars, Marechera expresses that “This endless game between Boer/ and Black/ Has nothing to do with Free Zimbabwe!” is his poem “The Undying Testament.”⁶⁴

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Because of Marechera’s distrust in the state, he promoted the individual as the uplifting mechanism for Africa. Marechera profusely expressed that “the machine of the nation-state gave the citizen a prefabricated identity made up of the rouge and lipstick of the struggle and revolution.”⁶⁵ He argues that a body of altruistic and educated citizens is the key to developing Africa.

The protagonist of *The Black Insider* notes “[Rhodesia’s] search for freedom has not included the most elementary

humanitarian” elements such as “homes for the elderly.”⁶⁶ In order to produce a citizenry that could uplift Africa, Marechera advocated for education as the driver of progress. For example, in “The Footnote to Hamlet,” Marechera writes “My whole/ History is unequal/... I have/... no resources but books.”⁶⁷ Similarly, in *The Concentration Camp*, Marechera’s protagonist, Tonderai, expresses that he “miss[es] his exercise books, left behind in the burning village.”⁶⁸ This message was especially pertinent since at the height of Marechera’s career, Ian Smith’s government was in the process of cutting “spending on primary education for black Africans” to the point that the majority of Christian missionary schools, which had provided Marechera his own education, would be closed.⁶⁹

Because of the power of education, Marechera proposes whites and blacks can coexist and work together within the same nations; however, he argues that such relations can only be created by individuals rather than mandated by government legislation. For example, the play *The Servants’ Ball* centers on the amicable relationship between a white employer, Drake, and his black domestic worker, Thomas. Thomas relates that “[Drake] his a real comrade”—the two “shout at each other... share jokes... get angry at each other” and carry on as any two friends might.⁷⁰ Drake even allows Thomas to “run [his] shebeen” in his own home.⁷¹ The play presents a vision of reconciliation. In the final scene, Thomas implores everyone to “kiss each other” and toast “THE FUTURE OF ZIMBABWE.”⁷² Key to this moment is the stage direction that specifies this final line be spoken by “all” the characters in Shona, English, Ndebele, and Nyanja.⁷³

CONCLUSION: A LONG ROAD

Marechera was neither a political scientist nor a historian, but nevertheless his experience in one of the most unique decolonizations of African history produced insightful commentary on how Africa should modernize. Marechera advocated individualism, pacifism, and education, while condemning the varieties of nationalism that had produced war and endless suffering throughout the course of his life. Despite the overwhelming darkness in his writings, there is meaning in the shadows. 

Endnotes

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- [8] *Ibid.*, 62.
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- [34] *Ibid.*
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