Abstract: Works of popular fiction have, for a long time, been denigrated as simple entertainment; “escapist” fiction, marred by formulaic narratives, superficiality, and sensationalism. This paper revisits the dialectic relationship between literature and history, and seeks to challenge the accepted notions of what constitutes ‘serious’ literature by dismantling the perceived barriers that exist between the “elite” and “popular” fiction brands. According to Bourdeu [1], the concept of ‘popular’ is always ambiguous because it comes to us inscribed with the history of political and cultural struggles. It is not only a site of contested evaluation but the term ‘popular’ has also been used pejoratively. ‘Popular’ has been used as synonymous with low-class; and low-class with irrelevant. This paper argues that popular literature carries within it the envisioned image of a given society, sometimes projected through the vision of the author or by the author satirizing the behaviour of the said society with the aim of enabling the society reflect upon its behaviour and effect necessary changes. The paper focuses on Pat Wambui Ngurukie's Soldier's Wife [2] and explores how this author engages with history. It therefore investigates the relationship between history and popular fiction and more so how the author of the selected text captures this interplay. By premising its discussions on selected tenets of New Historicism, this paper provides a description of the complex web of political, social and economic attitudes, values, ideals and situations in the selected text that constitute the conceptualization of the author's immediate environment. By employing close reading, the paper embarks on an intrinsic reading of the selected text and by focusing on characters, plot(s), setting(s) and use of language, examines the elements of popular fiction present in Pat Ngurukie's Soldier's Wife; and explores how the author engages with the history of the time of production. This paper's significance is derived from its provision of a way forward towards understanding how writers of popular fiction capture the history which shapes their work, furthering the growing corpus on studies focusing on Kenyan popular fiction, and contribution to the conceptualization of the interplay between history and popular fiction in particular, and culture in general.

Keywords: History, Popular Fiction, Soldier's Wife, Reversed Concepts, Marriage, Social Commentary.

INTRODUCTION

Literature and Society

Using a historic perspective, literature is seen as a product of human imagination which employs language artistically. It is a reflection of reality, reflecting man’s relationship with his environment. It is hereby seen as a mirror for mankind. Literature reflects issues and events through time, locations and characters. Reflection brings to mind the idea of resemblance – like that of a mirror. These reflections are historically conditioned because they are images of objects and people included at certain time and location in the history of man. Literature thus reflects human experiences at a given time and is based on something real.

Literature embodies a language, or a people’s culture: ways of life, thinking and tradition. However, literature is more important than just a historical or cultural artefact. Literature introduces us to new worlds of experience. Ultimately, we may discover meaning in literature by looking at what the author says and how he/she says it. We may interpret the author’s message. In academic circles, the decoding of the text is often carried out through the use of literary theory, using mythological, sociological, psychological, historical, or
other approaches. This paper employs selected tenets of New Historicism and locates Pat Wambui Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife within its historical context.

Literature is charged with the task of actively shaping culture. For instance, it is arguable that human beings may learn how to cultivate a romantic idea of love (only) after reading works of literature that portray love in this light rather than as a social or sexual arrangement between a man and a woman. For purposes of this paper, both ancient and modern approaches to literature emphasize on two major functions: to construct and articulate socio-cultural realities and to involve the reader in an invigorating interaction with these realities. This is the working definition for this paper.

In view of the foregoing, this paper explores how authors of popular fiction, with specific reference to the selected text, make use of the popular fiction genre as a medium for engaging with history to make social commentary. It therefore makes an attempt at exploring how the writer of the selected text captures and interacts with her immediate environment in the presentation of ‘reality’ and how the interplay between history and literature provides such possibilities.

The Relationship between History and Literature

Commenting on the relationship between history and literature, Bennett [3] observes that:

The understandings of literature’s specificity has consisted in the argument, variously formulated, that literature, viewed as a special kind of writing, is the product of historically specific relations of literary production. In countering this, I suggest that literature is more appropriately regarded as a historically specific, institutionally organised field of textual uses and effects....As Stephen Heath remarks, the historisation of literature ‘does not make it less real, any less specific (on the contrary)’. Indeed, to theorise literature historically and institutionally is to imbue it with a more concrete existence than is available from any aesthetic conception of ‘literature’ and, accordingly, allows questions of literary politics to be posed in a more concrete and specific manner.

The relationship between history and literature has been, for a long time, considered to be a dialectical one. Proponents of each have many a times accused each other of failing to either capture ‘reality’ (literature) or lacking objectivity (history). However, this long debate has bore no concrete fruits and it is the postulation of this paper that both fields do have a relationship that ensures that they feed off from each other. For instance, while history feeds literature with materials facts upon which to develop a story, the former also gains from the latter through several important areas and methodologies. History has been depicted to present ‘factual’ facts as they happen. This would be translated to mean that only the ‘vital’ and ‘important’ details are put into consideration. Literature, on the other hand, has more room for detailed interrogation and evaluation which thus leads to exploration of the minutest details. It is therefore worth noting that while both may at times operate from extreme ends, their existence depends on each other [4].

In addition, literature uses history as a backdrop. This way, it is arguable that literature speaks of and to the period it was written. If we consider the fact that no literary text (fiction or non-fiction) exists in a vacuum, it then follows that history feeds literature with the verisimilitude [5] it so needs to ‘speak’ to the readers. Commenting on the symbiotic relationship between history and literature, Wanjala [6] observes that:

Society is not defined only in its material attributes but also by its non-material characteristics. Social activities include politics, law, religion, philosophy, literature and art....literature influences the life of people....uses imagination and verisimilitude to make aspects of life clearer...

It is, therefore, the postulation of this paper that given the fact that literature utilizes symbols (language) to depict the events of a given period that shape the society, historians can learn a lot about a given society by examining the symbols of the writings that use that period as a platform for their literary work, whether fiction or non-fiction. This is because:

Reading the literature of any historical period can give you an idea of what the people of the time were like, how they lived, social conditions etc. It can tell you what the people’s views were on life, morality, what they considered important, what their beliefs were etc. Reading (or watching) the plays of Shakespeare for instance can give you some idea of what Elizabethan and Jacobean people were interested in, what they thought important, what they believed etc [4].
A reading of most African novels captures the reality of the time. This could perhaps explain why the thematic concerns of writers during the colonial period in Africa had to do with cultural conflict, the quest for independence, vagaries of colonialism, among others while those who wrote in post-independent Africa had themes revolving around alienation, disillusionment, corruption, etc. A person reading Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat quickly identifies with the post-independent Africa where false heroes were being celebrated at the expense of real heroes thus leading to a feeling of disillusionment with the much awaited ‘uhuru’. Likewise, a reading of Alex La Guma’s A Walk in the Night portrays nothing but the hostility between the whites and blacks in apartheid South Africa. Therefore, we can safely argue that literature reacts to historical situations, interprets and presents them. This concurs with Gakwandi [7] who observes that:

The African novel (literature) (is) a creative interpretation of history...which deal with the past....which portray the process of colonial domination....which recreate the struggle for independence and... evoke the post-independence social and political climate.

**Soldier’s Wife – An Overview**

Soldier’s Wife is a text by Pat Wambui Ngurukie. It is one among her many books including Tough Choices (1991), Businessman’s Wife (1991) and I will be your substitute (1984), just to mention but a few. First published on October 19, 1989 by Macmillan Education Limited, Soldier’s Wife revolves around the life of Pam Kanini Mutisya, who is married to Jimmy Mutisya, an army personnel. The text uses the popular fiction genre as a platform on which the author engages the readers in a journey through which a wide range of (social) themes and subjects such as marriage, tribalism, family relationships, sex and gender, traditions, among others, is explored.

Through the combination of a third person point of view and an omnipresent one, the author enables the reader to follow events which affect and shape Pam’s life. Set within a historical and spatial period spanning the war in Rhodesia (1971 – 1980), present day Zimbabwe, and the tradition of coups in Nigeria (1975 – Brigadier Muita LaRamat Muhammad and Lt-Gen Olusegun Obasanjo – and 1983 – Major General Muhammadu Buhari), the text explores the effects of war on family life and values. The text deals with the not-so-common subjects addressed by ‘serious’ literature and this, arguably, is a justifiable reason why the text can easily be classified under the popular fiction genre. Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife deals with the effects and vagaries of war, more so at the social level where family ties are severed, marriages broken, romance redefined and transnational boundaries transcended.

As is the norm with most popular fiction novels, the author has Pam marrying Jim in a hurried wedding with a marriage that lasts 6 days before Jim is sent to Rhodesia. This leaves Pam to trudge alone through the new experience of married life with letters between her and Jim as her companion. It is possible that the author is making an attempt at redefining romance and love. The two are reversed and redefined. When Pam receives an invite to join Jim in Rhodesia, this comes as the breakthrough she has been waiting for but little does she know that her most trying moments have just begun. Her arrival in Rhodesia marks the depiction of another version of Jim, a conniving serial monogamist whose high affinity for women is unrivalled. Jim turns out to be a womanizer who will stop at nothing to achieve his physical desires. For quite some time, Pam blames herself for the turn of events until she can take it no more and almost gives Jim a taste of his own medicine. Through a plethora of literary techniques, Ngurukie takes the reader through the life of Pam and the tribulations married women undergo under the suffocating embrace of patriarchy. It takes a near-death experience to change Jim back to the loving husband Pam thought he was. By the end of the novel, Jim has passed away leaving Major General Okonkwo to come and rescue Pam (again) from loneliness and dejection and ‘they live happily ever after’.

**Critical Issues of Debate**

Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife is premised on historical events. With regard to the mode of writing, setting, context and language, the author has resorted to popular fiction as a platform through which she gets space to engage with the history of the production of this text. The author thus uses popular fiction to make social commentary. This paper explores the interplay between history and literature (popular fiction) since literature is not a collection of the writings of individuals, but ‘organic wholes’ as systems in relation to which, and only which, individual works of literary art and the works of individual artists have their significance [8].

It is thus this paper’s contention that Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife is a text that engages with the history of post-independence Kenya while at the same time presenting issues that affect the populace at social, political and economic levels. This paper thus explores the relationship between popular fiction and history and discusses how Pat Ngurukie engages with the history of the time of production of Soldier’s Wife.

**Theoretical Underpinning**

The discussions in this paper are premised on selected tenets of New Historicism. It need not be
gainsaid that history influences culture, and is influenced by culture. In other words, historical events, as well as texts and artefacts are shaped by, and shape their culture at the same time. In regard to African literature, this paper concurs with New Historicism’s sharp rejection of New Criticism’s notion of close reading of a text in an isolated situation, and asserts that a text should be studied in its context. This is because social and political orientation can influence the work of art produced in that situation, while at the same time, the works of art produced in a society can give a clue to an accurate understanding of history. For instance, a deeper understanding of Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife is highly facilitated by a parallel understanding of the political, social and economic atmosphere of post-independent Kenya.

This paper thus posits that for effective analysis, understanding and criticism of popular fiction, discussing an author’s words, biography and acts in a particular time in history is not enough. The paper argues that in order to understand works produced during a particular period of history, one should analyze the culture in which the author and the work appeared. We shouldn’t analyze the phenomenon in an isolated manner, but rather ask why the phenomenon happened, and how. This is because the popular (fiction) literary text is the passive voice of lower middle-class in society and seeks to not only highlight their attitudes and feelings towards changes in society, but it is the (only) source through which they can look and laugh at their lives, albeit as a mechanism to cope with their immediate life complexities. Consequently, a literary text, like any other phenomenon, is formed and structured by the particular conditions of a time and place, and should be discussed in its own context, i.e. the social and cultural patterns of that era, and cannot be understood fully unless one considers these influences, too.

From the foregoing, it suffices that we should talk about interpretations of event not the facts. This comes in handy in the analysis of Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife which is premised on historical events. In other words, the issues tackled in the selected text are influenced by social and cultural contexts; and have a corresponding influence too. That’s why we cannot analyze Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife as an isolated creation because it is not only a literary but a cultural and social production of particular time(s). New Historicism thus provides a key with which the web of culture is entangled by allowing the exploration of the interplay between history and literature as depicted in Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife.

Review of Related Literature

According to Lindfors [9], the literature that emerged in Africa in the late twentieth century was profoundly influenced by political history. Lindfors argues that this literature was shaped by social forces. He further notes that writers of this form of literature served not only as advocates of social change but also were chroniclers of (political) history. This paper borrows a leaf from this observation and seeks to explore how Pat Ngurukie uses popular fiction as a space for presenting history in her text, Soldier’s Wife. Arguing for the importance of situating texts within their historical locales, Lindfors (ibid: vii) posits that:

African literary texts can be approached in a variety of ways. They may be examined in isolation as verbal artefacts that have a unique integrity. They may be studied in relation to other texts that preceded or followed them. Or they may be seen against the backdrop of the times, traditions and circumstances that helped to shape them.

The role of different fields in influencing society has been studied by various scholars. While defining the place of literature in the understanding of culture, Wanjala [6] observes that:

Society is not defined only in its material attributes but also by its non-material characteristics. Social activities include politics, law, religion, philosophy, literature and art. These activities are shared by all members of a given society irrespective of religion, creed or class. At its best, literature influences the life of people, and reflects tensions within groups as well as within individuals...uses imagination and verisimilitude to make aspects of life clearer than other forms of discourse can (emphasis mine).

It is worth noting that Wanjala stresses on the need for literature to rely on verisimilitude to capture aspects of “reality”. The question that follows from this argument is whether literature can achieve this task in isolation. This study seeks to argue that the selected text relies on historical happenings which thus give it the impetus needed to achieve the sense of verisimilitude [5, 6] that not only enable readers to extract meaning(s) from it, but also enables them (readers) to identify with the literary history inherent in the text.

Odhiambo [10] has explored the ways in which popular fiction writer David Maillu has used the canvas of popular fiction to make social commentary. Odhiambo demonstrates the extent to which different literary genres are exploited by writers of popular fiction to address imagined social needs. The study by
Odhiambo (ibid.) focuses on how Mailu’s *The Equatorial Assignment* and *Operation DXT* fall under the sub-genre of the romantic detective. This paper focuses on Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* and seeks to position the selected text in the popular fiction genre. While borrowing from Odhiambo’s study on the nature of popular fiction to address social needs, the study goes a step further and subjects Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* to a historical analysis through which the way the authors engage with the history of the time of the texts’ production is explored.

Ogolla [11] has examined contemporary Kenyan popular fiction as a site of cultural production, where the contradictions of African modernity are played out. Ogolla focuses on *Whispers*, a column that featured on *The Sunday Nation* and written by the late Wahome Mutahi. Ogolla’s study seeks to establish how the author uses the popular mode of representation to address perceived threats to masculinity as a product of social change. He also examines how the author resorts to popular fiction and uses humour, parody and satire to address pertinent issues affecting the society. This paper builds on this study and not only evaluates the elements that constitute popular fiction in the selected text but also subjects Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* to a historical analysis which seeks to situate the text in its immediate environment thus exploring the interplay between history and literature.

In a study on Postcolonial Africa, Kehinde [12] has presented the manner in which social and economic realities in the real world of post-independent Kenya come to be presented in Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*. In arguing for the position of *Going Down River Road*, Kehinde (ibid.) locates the text within its ideological and historical contexts. In addition, Kehinde’s study positions the text as a highly utilitarian art that hugely dwells on the socio-economic realities of its enabling milieu, thus giving it an identity and relevance based on its immediate environment. The present work also seeks to focus on post-independent Kenya but detours by focusing on Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife*.

According to the literature available to the researcher and as evidenced in the literature reviewed above, little or no research has been done on Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* with a view of exploring how the author engages with the times of the text’s production. In this regard, this paper fills this gap by not only situating the text within the times of its production but also by subjecting the text to an analysis so as to explore the interplay between history and literature.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Having demonstrated that history and literature are engaged in a complimentary relationship, this paper deems a historical approach necessary and particularly useful in providing a platform within which the interplay between history and literature can be explored in Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife*. Consequently, the paper follows Sharon’s [13] observation that one way to analyze literature is to think about the cultural and historical perspectives of the piece. With this in mind, this paper focuses on various units of analysis. First, the paper uses the expectations, preconceptions and prior knowledge of the works and the authors as a basis for evaluation and analysis. This is helpful since the knowledge that the works are premised on historical events enables us to be on the lookout for such signposts. Second, questions such as “what type of literary works and genre do the texts fall under?” form another unit of analysis. Here, the paper explores the elements of prose fiction manifested in the selected works. This comes in handy our attempt to explore the elements of popular fiction present in Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife*. Third, this paper focuses on major elements and techniques of literary writing in Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* as a unit of analysis. Here, by placing emphasis on plot, characters and characterisation, setting, point(s) of view, images and symbols, and style and language, the paper is in a vantage position to explore how Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* engages with the history of its production. Fourth, the paper also focuses on thematic concerns and subjects of interrogation in Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* as a unit of analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**History and Popular Fiction in Pat Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife**

Arguably, most Kenyan popular fiction writers concern themselves with a whole range of themes such as the vagaries of urbanisation, causes and effects of unemployment, prostitution, love, marriage, crime and violence, the neglect of the rural population by the ruling elite, moral, economic and political corruption, among others [14, 15]. With this in mind, this work posits that Pat Ngurukie’s *Soldier’s Wife* (1989) falls under the wider genre of popular fiction not only because of the thematic concerns the text deals with but also because of the embellished ornaments [5] the author employs.

This paper finds it apt to quote Bennett [16] who defines the genre of Romance as:

> ...a work of art in which the plot line must be substantial enough for the reader to maintain interest from chapter to chapter. In other words, the reader must be able to say when reading the book, ‘I care about these people and what happens to them. I want the best for them, despite the personal and circumstantial obstacles that war to keep them apart."

Available Online: [http://saspjournals.com/sjahss](http://saspjournals.com/sjahss)
Soldier’s Wife, despite a few adaptations, falls under the category of Romance since it very closely conforms and modifies this sub-genre. This is a sub-genre of popular fiction distinguished by an easily discernible plot that follows the life of two individuals who, regardless of the many hurdles and challenges they face, eventually fall in love. It is a quest for the depiction of love as having the ability to overcome challenges and obstacles. This sub-genre is also characterised by the presence of a specific type of setting. In most instances, the authors of this sub-genre set their work in exotic places thus enhancing the romantic mood. In the selected text, one cannot fail to notice Paris, lonely woods and weddings as settings that enhance the love scene (Soldier’s Wife, pp 93; 122).

Consequently, the setting an author decides on for his/her text speaks volumes. The setting of Ngurukie’s Soldiers’ Wife is by no means an accident. Pat sets her book in the 1970s and 1980s during the war in Rhodesia and arguably, the use of parallelism between the conflicts and confusion that mar countries at war can be distinctly mirrored in the conflict and confusion that define Pam’s life. Pam’s life is but an amalgamation of unanswered questions and uncertainty. As is rife with most popular fiction texts, the author uses the historical setting to shed light into subject matters deemed mundane by serious literature. By placing the text in this war mood, the author is thus able to explore the turmoil that defines the life of women in societies defined by patriarchal doctrines. By the time Pam is getting married to Jim, she thinks she has found the best man God could ever provide and she is so much in love and at peace that “everyday chores were done with smiles and laughter” (p. 38). This changes drastically when she joins Jim in Rhodesia. Jim has changed and he no longer seems to have the same feelings for her. It seems to have dawned on him that the more women he can lay his hands on, the merrier he will be.

It is worth mentioning that the events in the text oscillate majorly between three countries – Kenya, France and Rhodesia – and this is of significant value to this work. The presence of France is felt through the introduction of Paris as a setting. As earlier stated, history and fiction do feed from each other and it is arguable that the author uses a historical event – the war – to deal with social issues. As a writer of popular fiction and more so embedded in Romance, Ngurukie downplays the nature of the war and we are told very little about the cause and course of the war. Instead, she chooses to deal with thematic concerns deemed irrelevant during her time of writing. Ideally, the times of war are not the times to deal with “trivial” matters of love and relationships. The author thus simply uses the war as a background to discuss matters of love and marriage.

Of significance to this work is the use of the three countries mentioned above as a driving force of the plot. Rhodesia is depicted as a country ravaged by the effects of war and the confusion that defines such times. It is therefore a conducive environment for hatred and misplaced anger. Geographically, Rhodesia is a hot place that incubates feelings of regret, disdain and hatred. It is in Rhodesia where Jim’s feelings towards Pam start fluctuating between love and pure hatred. In a possible moment of authorial intrusion, the author quips, “Mutisya was as unpredictable with his love affairs as the Rhodesian weather” (Soldier’s Wife, p. 114). Rhodesia is thus presented in great contrast to Kenya which geographically, is a country majorly defined by cool climates. It is the ideal setting for the growth and nurture of romantic endeavours. In the text, the romantic engagement between Pam and Jim begins and blossoms while the two are in Kenya. Kenya, as a setting, thus becomes vital in the growth of the characters’ romantic life. Towards the end of the text, Pam’s emotional stability is only realized when she comes back and settles in Kenya. This is made even more pronounced by the fact that her second attempt at emotional fulfilment is achieved when Brigadier Okonkwo marries her in Kenya.

The use of Paris as an exotic setting for the events in the text is also of import to this work. Like Kenya, Paris becomes a space for the re-birth of romantic relationships and the solidification of old ones. Being the “world-acclaimed centre of love”, it is in Paris that Jim and Pam begin their journey toward emotional and marital stability. The entire period that captures their presence in France is marked by good tidings in their life. From Jim’s promotion to Pam achieving her life-long dream of learning French, the author seems to be selling Paris as a space for romance. This is aptly captured in the statement: “Life in France was full of happiness for them both; Jim loved his wife every hour of the day” (p. 122). For a text ostensibly set in a war period, Ngurukie seemingly deviates from the war and seeks to highlight the possibilities of romance. It is thus the argument of this work that writers of popular fiction in Africa use historical events and phenomena as a backdrop against which to engage in social commentary. This explains why Ngurukie relegates the war to the background and chooses to focus on matters pertaining to love and romance, marriage life as an institution, the virtues of forgiveness – thematic concerns considered mundane.

During times of war, the populace is always engulfed by tension. No one really seems to know who will win the war and what the victors might do. In such cases, it is possible to have people who sympathise with either sides and might make excuses for them. The fighting between the Rhodesian government and the guerrilla freedom fighters is no exception. This is
paralleled in Pam’s life throughout the text. She feels that she is losing Jim but still feels it is her duty to stand by him. When all the evidence points to Jim as a serial monogamist who not only runs away with his junior officer’s girlfriend (Rosetta) (p. 58), but also got ‘temporarily married to local girls; (p.58), Pam still takes it upon herself to make excuses for him. For instance, Jim decides to spend time with Rosetta instead of meeting Pam at the airport and leaves the task to the Njorges. As she awaits his return from ‘official duties’, Pam is confronted by evidence that her husband is not who she thinks he is. Perhaps brought up within an African setting where patriarchy is the norm of the day, Pam is portrayed as a naive girl who believes in love and who must make excuses for Jim’s behaviour. Despite being deeply hurt and disappointed, the author has her saying ‘I think I am misjudging Jim. He must have been in a hurry when he wrote this note. I know he loves and cares for me...’’ (p.44).

Closely related to the above is the way Pam reacts to the knowledge that her husband is cheating on her. Just like the populace during the times of war who are driven by fear and can’t question the powers-that-be, Pam decides to hurt inside rather than question her husband’s infidelity. Whenever Jim is undergoing his ‘slight feelings of guilt’ (p. 72), he resorts to being on the offensive to stop Pam from asking questions. Deep down, she knows why he is being rude to her and in a foul mood but decides not to ask. She stops trying to understand his “bad moods” which were ‘more frequent than a pregnant woman’s’ (p.73). This work argues that the author uses the parallelism between times of war and mirrors the same in marriage. Pam’s marriage to Jim is marked by uncertainty and fear. She fears the consequences of questioning the authority and thus withdraws to a cocoon of disappointment and fear.

This work also seeks to explore the presentation of Pam as a formulaic character of popular fiction. This is closely related to the setting discussed above in the sense that popular fiction writers already have a target audience and must therefore strive to ‘speak’ to them. In other words, the language used and the characters created by the author must coincide with the audience’s version of reality so that they (the audience) can identify with them (the characters). Consequently, writers of popular fiction must conform to the representation of stoic characters whom the audience expects to see.

Ngurukie’s book, Soldiers’ Wife, has one such character – Pam. Pam is depicted as a modern woman who reflects the concerns of the day – the fight against patriarchy. To achieve the objective of voicing her concern, the story is narrated from a third person point of view, her point of view. This could perhaps explain why her presence shadows each and every scene in the text. Whether it is in the officer’s mess or in the jungle, every event has a corresponding effect on Pam’s life. When Jim is busy ‘happily kissing and laughing with his mistress’ (p.93) on the bonnet of a Land Rover in the jungle, the audience can feel the anger in Brigadier Okonkwo. By extension, this anger is amplified by the feeling of pity the reader has towards the loving and trusting Pam who is being betrayed by Jim. It therefore suffices to argue that by using Pam’s voice as the voice of reason, the author seems to be communicating to the immediate audience (the 1970s) that patriarchy no longer has room in a developing society. This is also vital in enabling students of culture get a glimpse of the 1970s post-independent Africa and the trials women had to undergo in the struggle to emancipate themselves from the clutches of male dominance.

Pam is also depicted as an attractive and nicely dressed woman who is defined by her virtuous character and glamour. This is in contrast to all the other women in the text who fight for Jim’s attention. Despite her many temptations to leave Jim and fall into the arms of Brigadier Okonkwo, Pam values her marriage vows and sticks by the irresponsible Jim. This is despite that fact that both are aware of the feelings between them. It is only after Jim’s death that Pam finally marries Major General Okonkwo who can now provide comfort and solace (p. 136). This goes a long way in showing the moral road that writers of popular fiction are apt at taking. Despite the so-called strong language and vivid description of moral decadence, texts which fall under this category, more often than not, tend to have a moral lesson or messages to pass across [17, 18]. Ngurukie’s Soldier’s Wife can be argued to advocate for faithfulness, perseverance, tolerance and understanding, just to mention but a few. It is worth mentioning that this is no mere coincidence and is a reflection of the author’s own beliefs and values. As an individual, Ngurukie is herself a committed Christian and a divorcee. She was actually married to a soldier before the divorce. This work thus posits that Ngurukie’s foray into issues to do with the sanctity of marriage and the important role of forgiveness in the marriage institution is highly influenced by her religious stands.

Arguably, the most prominent theme among the popular fiction writings of the 1970s and 1980s is promiscuity and prostitution. As observed by Odhiambo [10], “whenever sex/sexuality is written about in the African novel, invariably the question of promiscuity and prostitution forms a significant element of this discourse because it has become one of the most important components of urban life in Africa.’ Ngurukie makes an attempt at questioning the patriarchal conceptions where men are given the implicit freedom to steer the relationships they are in. Regarding monogamy, being faithful is a one-sided affair where the man asks the woman to be faithful to...
him without a corresponding demand on himself. Ngurukie uses notions of romance and love as a platform on which to analyse issues concerned with gender and marriage. Using ‘love at first sight’ as a trope (p. 8 – 10), Ngurukie presents to us a Pam who is so much in love with Jim that they can’t imagine anything going wrong with their lives. Immediately the two fall in love, they hurriedly get married and ‘Mutisya and Kanini were both young and too much in love to care what was happening outside the four walls of their house’ (p. 39). This soon changes when reality strikes and Jim turns out to be the African promiscuous man Ngurukie intends to portray (p. 60). Ngurukie presents to us a man who is incapable of being faithful to his wife despite the many assurances he gives both to himself and to his wife. This paper argues that the author uses a common feature of popular fiction to plunge into a deeper analysis of issues that affected society in the 1970s – the subject of marriage. Through this platform, the author questions the man’s unquestionable right to be unfaithful while the woman dutifully awaits the husband’s redemption.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it suffices for this paper to conclude that despite the argument that texts are autonomous entities by their own authority and thus the need to avoid both the intentional fallacy (biographical criticism) and historical fallacy, most popular fiction texts in Africa have an intimate connection with their historical and social context. As evidenced in this paper, more often than not, this context is repressed and used as a backdrop to discuss matters otherwise considered mundane by the so-called canonical literature. As this paper has demonstrated, Ngurukie resorts to the war in Rhodesia not as an avenue to discuss its cause and course, but as a background on which to make social commentary. This could perhaps explain why she relegates the war to the background and chooses to focus on matters pertaining to love and romance, marriage life as an institution, the virtues of forgiveness, and the vagaries of patriarchy, among others. In a way, therefore, the text employs history as “the repressed unconscious” of literature.

This paper has also shown that no matter how ‘trivial’ or ‘unimportant’ a text may appear, like any other historical phenomenon, the said texts can and should be analysed for their historicity. This is because by making use of comparable texts form the same period as the said texts, such an analysis is bound to lead to a greater understanding of how a specific text interacted with its environment. As discussed in this paper, it is clear that the selected text does embody within itself elements of popular fiction as evidenced in its setting, thematic concerns and character and characterisation.

In conclusion, therefore, this paper avers that in the history-literature axis, both fields are interlinked in a complex web of interdependency. In this regard, the relationship between the two becomes dialectic in that history is no longer the cause or source of the work while the literary text (in this case the popular fiction text) becomes both the producer and product of history. The existence of the literary work does not therefore mean the demise of history but in contrast, becomes the end and source of it. The text, by virtue of being “alive” long after production, becomes the living embodiment of this historicity which, by use of appropriate tools, can always be “exhumed” for analysis. In this case, therefore, the historicity carries with it the ideology behind the work of art (the text) thus negating the concept of one superseding the other. This is because both history and popular fiction feed each other in such a manner that the denial of one’s existence leads to an immediate death of the other. In other words, the absence of the historical aspect in the text denies the researcher a relationship between the text and historicity to study.

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