

Literature



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Marxist Perspective on “ A Freedom Song” When reading through a piece of literature, a critic will often interpret the meaning based upon his or her individual approach. There are numerous schools of thought that can direct the ideas of the reader of a poem. These include feminist, deconstructionist, psychological and so on. When reading poems such as “ A Freedom Song”, one perspective that might come to mind is the Marxist perspective, based on the sociological theories of Karl Marx. A critic applying the Marxist perspective to “ A Freedom Song” might concentrate on elements such as the lower social status of Atieno as compared to the speaker, the power struggle between the speaker and Atieno and the misery of the characters represented.

In focusing on the different social status of the characters represented in the poem, the critic will point out the various ways in which Atieno is essentially a slave to her older and more successful relative. This difference in social status equates to a significant difference in expected responsibilities as Atieno, at only 8 years old, is expected to perform all the basic functions of the house making it possible for the speaker’s wife, the child’s aunt, to sit all day and sew. This gives the impression that the wife’s chores are not as heavy or as tiring as those given to the niece. This kind of difference in expectations is what Marx points to when he indicates that the lower classes will rise up against perceived injustices in the division of labor to reward.

The Marxist critic is also likely to focus on the apparent power struggle occurring between Atieno and the speaker as a result of these differences in labor expectations. The girl is covetous towards her cousins’ things, she “ spends too long at market” (26) and is evidently given a place to sleep but not the same access to education that her cousins have. This idea is given

voice as the speaker asks, " Don't I keep her, school my own ones / Pay the party, union fee" (20-21). Because she has no power of her own and no real chance of escaping her situation, Atieno rebels against her system the only way she knows how. This speaks directly to Marx's theory that when the laboring classes have finally had enough of capitalist gain being withheld, they will cease to perform until more equitable terms have been made available.

Finally, the Marxist critic is likely to take a look at the misery of the lower classes as it is reflected in the lives of all the characters mentioned. Although Atieno is obviously the worse-off among the cast, there are hints throughout the poem that all is not well with the host family, either. The wife spends all day sewing, but " with her earnings I support Atieno yo" (10-11). Two years later, the wife has gone to study and the speaker must work nights, leaving Atieno to care for their children and the house. This family is not much better off than the child being spoken of. When she dies, they provide a huge feast for her, with " meat and sugar more than all / she ate in such a narrow life" (37-38) while they wait to see whether the baby survives and quickly replace the dead girl with a living girl willing to do the work expected. This again speaks to Marx's theory that the capitalists will continue to do nothing but exploit the lower classes because of their perception that there is always someone else ready and willing to come in and do the work expected.