

The Mass Media and the Perpetuation of Despotism in Hama Tuma's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

The African continent continues to grapple with challenges of despotic leadership. Since the citizens of various African countries have adopted a host of responses to counter despotism, the despots have reengineered the craft of despotism into a sly and manipulative form of leadership where countries project a hoodwinking façade of democracy while the masses remain oppressed. Ethiopia is one of the African countries which have been run by dictators yet she has steadily exhibited a backcloth of democracy. Modern despots recognize that one of the hallmarks of democracy in society is a free press hence they attempt to manipulate it in order to present a false front of democracy to influence the citizens' perception. This paper investigates the contribution of Hama Tuma's selected short stories in engaging the rampant and evolving phenomenon of despotism in the continent so as to unpack the new face of despotism. It particularly explores how the author exposes the mass media as a pliable tool used by despots in enhancing authoritarianism. Hermeneutics of suspicion is used for the critical reading and analysis of the selected short stories.

Keywords: Mass Media, Despotism, Hama Tuma, Short Stories

1.0 Introduction

The tendency of African leaders to exploit existing institutions to their advantage so as to create illusions of democracy is on the rise. Currently, there is a new crop of tyrants in Africa who have manipulated the citizenry to attain and ground their positions. Even some who began as outright dictators have conveniently metamorphosed into quasi democrats. These despotic African leaders excel in whitewashing the concept of democracy by strategically displaying plastic ornaments of democracy yet such governments are authoritarian to the core. Their governments thus succeed in portraying the image of democracy to the cursory onlooker while the reality is otherwise; for instance, Paul Kagame and Nkurunziza's controversial third term jabs as president, Museveni's age limit debate, Uhuru's 'timely' electoral law reforms after the bungled 2017 general elections, among others. Such governments routinely hold elections, have legislative assemblies and a judiciary. However, as Gandhi (2004) points out, in dictatorships political parties hardly compete, elections do not select and legislatures do not decide. These despots, in striving to cement their longevity in power, employ varied strategies including the manipulation of the mass media in a bid to hoodwink the masses who subsequently remain exploited and oppressed. Today, there is a growing phenomenon of what Matfess (2015) has referred to as "developmental authoritarianism" (p. 3) that is characterized by a State being perceived to be on the path of economic growth though against a backdrop of an oppressed and voiceless citizenry. In such cases, the government of the day ably provides a façade of democratic competition while staving off any serious challenge to power. According to Ayittey (2012), rulers at the helm of such dictatorships owe their success to their firm grip on the main branches of government namely the civil service, judiciary, electoral commissions, security forces, the mass media and the central bank.

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Ethiopia as a country dates back to 3000 BC and is endowed with diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and resources (Admassu, 2012). Her cultural history is relatively dissimilar to the rest of Africa since she was never a colony of any European nation. Though Ethiopia lacks a colonial history, she faces near similar challenges of nationhood as the rest of postcolonial Africa thereby to some degree debunking the supposition by some pundits that the African dictators are products of the oppressive colonial regime. Ethiopia's history is dotted with a lot of political upheavals as a result of autocratic leadership and it has been opined that though the Ethiopian government has superficially committed to the ideals of democracy, many local and foreign bodies like Human Rights Watch often condemn it for being undemocratic by largely disrespecting the citizens' freedom of association, expression, and assembly (HRW, 1997; HRW, 2014; Demeke, 2014; Matfess, 2015). For instance, Matfess (2015) avers that the Ethiopian government has both prevented the dissemination of narratives critical of the government and adopted a program of government-led conferences that serves to further embed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) within the society. Matfess adds that the Ethiopian administration came up with an anti-terrorism bill in the year 2009 which has been effectively used to persecute critical members of the press as well as political opponents.

Hama Tuma is an Ethiopian writer born Iyasou Alemayehu in Addis Ababa in May, 1949 but uses Hama Tuma as his pseudonym. He studied law at Addis Ababa University where he was also a leading member of The Ethiopian People Revolution Party, an organization of militant students opposed to the absolute reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, in the 1970s. He continues to fight for the democratic space in Ethiopia and was one of the most prominent opponents of the Ethiopian military dictatorship (The Derg of Mengistu Haile Marriam) and the Tigreian regime (later called Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front) that succeeded it (Gikandi, 2007; Chernet, 2014). His chosen path of political activism has seen him spend most of his time writing against social injustices meted on the Ethiopian citizens by various regimes in the country and is today considered among the fiercest satirists the country has ever produced. He has even been described as "one of the most brilliant and original of the African writers" (Gordon, 1999, p.36). To Chernet (2014), it was out of Tuma's experiences with dictatorship and his opposition towards it that he honed his skills as a master of political satire.

The role of the literary artist in engaging with the socio-political ills in society has been contrasted with that of the journalist. Amadi (1983) observes that it should be both disturbing and lamentable for a novelist to squander his art in decrying a bad government or ushering in an untried political system yet there are armies of journalists who are doing just this in countless newspapers and magazines all over the globe. Works of fiction and those of journalism are however known to have swapped positions and roles in some societies. There are cases where journalism, instead of being committed to addressing the wrongs of the political class and subsequent plight of the ruled, has been compromised and the literary artist has taken over. Fandy (2007) posits that often times in an authoritarian setting, newspaper reporting and fictional accounts trade places. Citing the case of Egypt, Fandy notes that the newspapers in this State have been known to put forth fictionalized accounts of happenings in the country while the most insightful accounts of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak can be read in novels. To Fandy, the interchangeable quality of fiction and journalism is very common in settings where confrontation with the political leadership prove costly.

This paper looks at how the mass media is used to aggrandize authoritarianism in Tuma's short stories. The author, in his writings, chiefly exposes the socio-political injustices committed against the masses by an authoritarian ruling class. The ruled in most cases detest authoritarian leadership; however, the ruling class, in Tuma's short stories, tactfully manipulates the mass media to foster a democratic face despite the suffering of the citizenry. Through the lens of hermeneutics of suspicion, this paper argues that the leadership, in a conscious endeavour to dissociate itself from the label of dictatorship projects a democratic front through the manipulation of the press to either hoodwink the unsuspecting masses or subdue the critical members of the public. The paper further contends that while despotic leadership has in the past been associated with pure brute force mainly by oppressive rulers with military background, this is no longer the case as the modern dictators consciously coat their despotic tendencies in democratic garments. With close reference to Tuma's short stories, this paper therefore examines the place of the mass media in the changing face of authoritarianism in Africa.

2.0 Theoretical Frame

This paper relies on hermeneutics of suspicion to analyze its gathered data. The term hermeneutics of suspicion was coined by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and is grounded in allegorical hermeneutics which is chiefly exemplified by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud.

To Ricoeur, interpretation is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden levels of meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning (Itao, 2010). Marx, Freud and Nietzsche have been referred to as the ‘masters of suspicion’ who were skeptical about economics, psychoanalysis and genealogy respectively and all the three look upon the contents of consciousness as in some sense ‘false’; all three aim to transcend this falsity through a reductive interpretation and critique (Ricoeur, 1998 p.6). At the core of hermeneutics of suspicion, therefore, is the thesis that the evident superficial meanings and thoughts which characters express are masking deeper meanings and thoughts which they often find reasons to hide and which may be quite different from or indeed quite contrary to the surface meanings and thoughts they project hence the self is not immediately transparent to itself or fully master of it. Ricoeur therefore holds that interpretation should be pursued well beyond the text, into the unconscious (Freudian) and into the cultural structures of Nietzsche and Marx.

3.0 Methodology

The paper has employed the analytical research design in the collection and analysis of the data. As a method of qualitative inquiry, analytical research denotes a non interactive document research that describes and interprets the past or recent past from selected sources be they documents preserved in collections, participants’ oral testimonies or a literary text (Macmillan & Schumacher, 1997). This design enhances an in-depth analysis and interpretation of a topic through evaluation of data relative to the research being conducted. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), analytical research design readily assists the researcher to ‘find patterns among the voluminous details describing the subject matter of the study’ (p.399). This research was basically qualitative in approach. Since this research set out to explore and analyze the role of the mass media in fueling despotism in Tuma’s works, it is mainly characterized by in depth analysis and interpretation of the gathered data. The eight short stories selected for this study, arrived at through purposive sampling, are drawn from the thirty four short stories in the anthologies: *The case of the socialist witchdoctor and other stories* and *The case of the criminal walk and other stories*. They include, ‘The Case of the Presumptuous Novelist’, ‘Death of a Renegade’, ‘The Case of the Queue Breaker’, ‘The Case of the Incurable Hedonist’, ‘The Mob’, ‘The Sheratonians’, ‘The Rumours Bar’, and ‘The Coward who Hid his Eyes’. Ethiopian fiction in English is one of the lesser known participants in the African fiction scene because many Ethiopian writers have a strong background in Amharic hence this paper unlocks both the works of Tuma and the larger Ethiopian literary discourse. This paper also gives a deeper understanding of the shifting face of despotism in Africa.

4.0 Mass Media and the State in Hama Tuma’s Short Stories

The mass media plays a cardinal role in any society. The phrase ‘mass media’, according to Ngara and Esebonu (2012), has been defined by various scholars to mean a channel, vehicle, medium, or conduit that is used by a practitioner to inform a ‘wide and diverse audience’ for the purpose of influencing the government or the people. It includes the print media such as newspapers, magazines, journals, books and other forms of publication and the broadcast media transmitted through sound and visual images such as radio and television (Janda et al., 1998, p. 96). It is therefore a cogent force that does not only inform but is also able to influence the socio-political perceptions and consequent actions of both the citizens and the government of the day. It bears the onus of functioning as an accurate and keen watchdog of events and activities in a society. Subsequently, ‘it has a moral obligation to society to provide adequate information for citizens to make informed decisions’ (Ostini & Fung, 2002, p. 42).

Most African countries today can be loosely described as democratic although they still manifest a raft of authoritarian tendencies including the muzzling of the press. In some cases governments deliberately strive to shrink the journalists’ space in the society. Coliver and Merloe (1997) observe that the current major problem facing the media in nascent democracies is the governments’ intervention through direct censorship, physical threats and attacks, imprisonment, intimidation, and murder. Against all these odds though, the media is still expected to cover political facts and events in the most objective, impartial and open way so as to promote a variety of views and opinions as well as interpret news in order to make the public understand the relevance of the information they receive (OSCE – ODIHR, 2005). Due to the gagging of the media by the leadership, the press is often unreliable to the extent that newspaper reporting and fictional accounts trade places especially in settings where confrontation with the authorities prove costly (Fandy, 2007). In such cases, mass media becomes mere fictionalized accounts of the society’s experiences meant to serve the whims of the despotic leadership.

4.1 The Mass Media and the Promotion of Self interest of Despotic Leadership

Tuma invokes the role and place of the media in his fictitious world by crafting a society that is largely ruled by an authoritarian leadership that is equally fully cognizant of the cogence of this platform and hence strives to manipulate it in order to reinforce and sustain their strangle hold on the masses. Superficially, the citizenry is treated to what appears to be a free media in a democratic country though the intrigues that influence the eventual churning out of what is consumed in the public space suggests otherwise. The mass media, both print and audio-visual, is stifled by the government since it single handedly determines and sieves what should reach the public arena as news. For instance in Tuma (1993), the prisoner in ‘The Presumptuous Novelist’ is accused of violating articles of the country’s Penal Code which:

Forbid writing or thinking of writing any article, word, letter, story, poem, memoir, leaflet or tract whose contents, however superb or miserable the (sic) form or style, insult, attack, belittle, cause others to think badly of the State (p. 109)

In an authoritarian system therefore, the mass media can best thrive if it reports fabricated information at the behest of the rulers who also know that in a democratic country the citizens have a right to information. To satisfy the tag of democracy, they readily avail the information but in a way that at best only serves their selfish ends. The State is guilty of fabricating news items for the mass media that is spineless and devoid of objectivity or independence. In line with this observation, it has been argued that away from the world of fiction and on the actual scene, the Ethiopian independent media has been un-investigative, gullible, irresponsible and highly sensational and that for some papers ‘the boundary between news reporting and news making is blurred’ (Shimelis, 2002, p. 201). The case of the Presumptuous Novelist is therefore prototypical of the reality on the ground.

In the society depicted in Tuma’s stories, the mass media significantly enhances the self-preservation of the leadership. Although the leadership conceals its intentions, the Marxian theory of ideology discloses that the central moral, political, and economic ideas that dominate discussion in the mass media in a despotic society are ‘those that promote the self interest of the ruling class’ (Leiter, 2004:14). Tuma’s ‘Renegade’ presents an accused who is lured by an array of promises chief among them being recognition by the State. The interrogator, Major Teshome, cunningly tells the prisoner that he is a famous person and must publicly explain to the citizens the reasons behind his acceptance to join the government. Major Teshome recognizes that it is not a common occurrence for a rebel to join forces with a government that he has been fighting and as such the public will require some explanation which he knows they will look to the media to provide. He then hatches an elaborate plan of action to dupe the masses. He presents the Renegade in Tuma (1993) with a definite script:

We want to make sure your explanation calls for unity, supports the government ... your group is recognized as a political force ... you will be named the political head of the front. The whole thing will be publicized in the mass media (pp. 154 – 155).

This obviously means that the mass media has no choice but to convey the information authored by the authorities in a manner that the government deems fit. Major Teshome’s tone of finality clearly conveys the State’s authority and the predetermined goal to be achieved by the Renegade’s statement. Essentially, a decision has already been arrived at which will ensure that the information reaches the citizens as packaged by the authorities. Consequently, the mass media lacks the freedom to choose their news items whether for content or manner of presentation. The mass media is not only reduced to a mouth piece of the State but also a piece of State fiction. What is vital in this case is the presence of an elaborate scheme to use the mass media to project a false face of a united State that continues to garner support even from the most unlikely quarters. This intimates the government’s rising popularity and is intended to sway the public opinion. Immediately such information reaches the citizenry, their understanding is that the government is strong, united and continues to receive additional numbers in its support. The government employs such antics with a clear but subtle motive of manipulating the perception of the masses.

The government’s manipulation of print media so as to influence the citizens is evident in the case of the Renegade. Enticed by power and propelled by the promise of recognition, the accused begins to fantasize envisaging the cameras clicking around him and all the grins and handshakes as he is accepted and honoured by the government. His desire for the position of the head of the political front, the fame and possibly the material gains that will accompany it leads the Renegade to self betrayal and consequent destruction because unknown to him, all these promises are illusionary and the only thing that the mass media will report is his execution in cold blood.

There are two versions of the information to be handed over to the media for broadcasting by the authorities. The one that is orally shared with the prisoner constitutes the contents of the false conscious while the official and real version that is finally published in the newspapers conveys the hidden reality of the motive of the government which is to cover up the murder and portray the prisoner as one who is both guilty and against the establishment hence deserves to be executed. The narrator reports:

The next day, the newspapers carried an official story announcing the execution of 'the renegade and reactionary' who had been tried, and found guilty, sentenced, and his sentence confirmed by the chairman, and the punishment carried out (p. 156).

The noun phrase, 'an official story' implies that it is sanctioned by the State and so the newspapers are simply government mouth pieces that lack independence hence subject to manipulation and abuse by the authorities. Besides, the mass media in this instance is not reporting the actual truth which is that this gentleman was severely tortured, bled and even lost some of his teeth before swallowing the bait of the government's rosy promise of inclusion in the daily running of the State. The Renegade's experiences unmask the agents of the State as unreliable and cruel towards the opposition yet they use the mass media to project a false but appealing image to the masses. The mass media is then guilty of fuelling despotism in such cases. It is so pliable that the despotic leadership almost effortlessly engages in 'news making' while the journalists are reduced to mere marionettes and by-standers in their own trade. In 'The Case of the Queue Breaker' the life of the masses is punctuated by State propaganda aimed at subduing the citizens into submission. The calculating State operatives publish and sell newspapers and political pamphlets to the queuers in a clear attempt to indoctrinate them into submissive State apologists. The State cheekily explains the import of these writings as developing the ideological consciousness of the masses but fails to reveal the main objective of such newspapers and magazines which is to brainwash the masses so as to accept their station in life. For instance, the State owned monthly magazine, 'We Shall Queue' first mischievously thrusts the ownership to the citizens. The use of the pronoun 'we' in its title pronounces the masses' automatic sense of belonging and ownership of the magazine yet it is run by the oppressive government. 'We Shall Queue' therefore registers the naïve willingness of the masses to be oppressed as is witnessed in the long queues of patient citizens waiting for government service in the short story. In essence, the leadership exploits the moral willingness of the masses to be oppressed and as Nietzsche argues, morality lacks rational foundation (Leiter, 2004). Besides, the narrator says that the ties between the queuers are abstract and real suggesting that although the reality is that their experiences are similar in terms of oppression, it remains an abstraction for them to perceive themselves as an oppressed people who ought to use their united force against the government. The absurdity in all this is that the mass media that should raise the consciousness of the citizens against oppression is the same avenue that the despotic leadership uses to blindfold them.

Despite the outward disposition of a democratic system, the government crafted in Tuma's short stories is very repressive. It dictates on both the content and the public's mode of consumption of the items in the mass media. During a conversation among the Sheratonians in the short story that goes by the same title, Romy's indignation at the fact that Jiggy reads the gutter press is clear and Romy asks 'You did not hear the PM say do not read them?' and in response, 'Jiggy gave a non-expressive smile and tactfully chose to be silent' (Tuma, 2006, p.164). The smile is non-expressive but it superficially conceals his disgust at such authoritarian expectations by the State. However, his supposed disapproval of the government directive is just another veil to disguise his fear for the possibility of the gutter press targeting them as the elite of the society and hence, although he is not willing to admit it, the PM's decree also serves to protect their ilk from the ridicule by the gutter press. The ensuing silence actually speaks of the citizens' fear and consciousness of the presence of the State even in their small and private spaces like an informal evening chat with a group of friends in a restaurant. The PM giving a decree on what the citizens should not read also suggests the potency of the mass media in that the PM is not only driven by the fear of what the gutter press is likely to say about the despotic leadership and the subsequent impressions of the public but is also unable to stop the production of the 'gutter press' and resorts to reining in on the consumers of such products to check on their possible devastating effects.

The PM's gesture of stooping to the level of passing decrees on non-mainstream mass media is an indirect acknowledgement of the awareness that the 'gutter press' can be used by ordinary members of the public to subvert or critique those in positions of power. Just like cartoons, the gutter press has the potential of reducing the otherwise powerful people – the authoritarian leaders - to ordinary and fallible human beings with weaknesses just like the other citizens.

The leadership therefore tactfully attempts to stave off the likelihood of the gutter press peeling off the façade of power and infallibility that normally surrounds them. By portraying those in power as behaving ridiculously, they subject them to laughter thereby giving the ordinary citizens some semblance of power over their leaders and this is what the leadership loathes. Harcup (2016) defines Gutter journalism as a derogatory term for whatever sort of journalism of which the speaker disapproves. It often contains shocking stories about crime, sex, and famous people. The ‘gutter press’ is a repository of shocking stories about prominent people’s private lives and hence it equates to Freud’s unconscious and in the PM restraining the public from consuming its contents, he is mainly driven by his fears and apprehension towards the likely sordid revelations about this society that the leadership would rather shove to the unconscious.

Apart from muzzling the gutter press, the authoritarian government employs other strategies to censor what the public consumes in terms of news items. In certain cases the leadership enforces some very crude and desperate approaches so long as they suit their self interest. For instance, in ‘Presumptuous Novelist’ the narrator reports in Tuma (1993) that:

The film version of Julius Caesar was seen here with the Caesar murder-scene cut out, and another film called ‘King of the Thieves’ was censored altogether in case the title should give wrong ideas to the subjects of his Imperial Majesty (p. 107).

By cutting out the Caesar murder scene, the leadership fears the audience’s possible reactions after their interaction with an instance where a revered leader faces rebellion and eventual murder by his fellow leaders or citizens. The despotic leadership is unsettled by their concealed understanding that the oppressed citizens may imagine a similar possibility with the sitting head of State. Interestingly, from the narrator’s report, it can be surmised that those who were in charge of the censorship had no problems with the scenes where Mark Anthony whips up the citizens’ emotions thereby instigating them to run after the murderers of Caesar with the intent of avenging his death. The possible self serving moral peddled by the despotic leadership here would be that if one murders a leader, they have to pay for it and this would scare the citizenry against antagonizing the leadership. Besides, the title, ‘The King of Thieves’ is unpalatable because it insinuates that a leader can be a thief and this would send wrong signals to the masses who might begin to think about and discover the possible source of their biting poverty. Letting the citizenry access certain information, it is feared by the leadership, would give them ideas that would make them destabilize the government of the day. Consequently, the censorship reveals the fear and feeling of insecurity by the leadership and their determination to control what the masses consume and how they think.

The mass media, being in the service of the rulers, largely lacks objectivity which, unfortunately, is a basic principle of the trade. The author satirizes the mass media’s surrender to manipulation by the despotic government and how it enables the perpetuation of the government’s stranglehold on the subjects. The narrator in ‘The Incurable Hedonist’ says that the story is set in a country which thrives in pain with pleasure being a monopoly of the ruling class. It is satirically put that the pleasure of the rulers is proportionate to the pain of the ruling class yet the mass media turns a blind eye to all the suffering of the masses. The author bemoans the tendency of the practising journalists who abdicate their work ethics in order to appease the rulers. The narrator says in Tuma (1993) that:

Graduates from the school of pseudology, who are in thousands, who work at present within the ideological schools, the Great Chairman’s press office and the mass media, have tried to give different explanations for the existing situation, especially as to why the people suffer while the rulers are so happy and basking in luxury and contentment (p. 123).

Tuma’s satirical coinage ‘pseudology’ in reference to the mass media suggests a profession whose ideology is premised on the quick sand of falsehood or better still referred to as ‘fake news’ in contemporary times. Since they are ‘graduates from the school of pseudology’ they have internalized the art of hypocrisy which basically formed part of their training. Against a backdrop of the suffering majority, the press zealously highlights irrelevant pieces that are geared to solidifying and defending the selfish and irresponsible despotic leadership. The press therefore serves as a false beacon of democracy. To find a befitting sentence for Tigist – a dissenting voice – in ‘Queue Breaker’, the presiding judge resorts to ‘the democratic practice of accepting suggestions’ (Tuma, 1993, p. 71) from those attending the court proceedings to paint a picture of democracy. Interestingly the judge nominates a reporter of the government leaning newspaper ‘We Shall Queue’ to pass the verdict and he does not disappoint. The journalist firmly but gladly says, ‘as a reporter of the favourite magazine of queuers, let me say that every queuer in Ethiopia will be glad if the accused gets the maximum punishment’ (p. 71).

The mass media then shares in the irresponsibility of the authoritarian leadership. It allows itself to be manipulated by the despotic system which strives to assist the citizens to appreciate their unfortunate state and not to perceive the leadership as the source of their problems. The author portrays the mass media as guilty of misinforming the public by consciously displacing the despotic leadership as the source of the plight of the citizens and in its place fixing some scapegoats despite the glaring luxury and contentment of the ruling class. The mass media in this case aligns itself to the ruling class against the ruled and as such fuels despotism.

Essentially, Tuma presents a mass media that is totally unreliable. In 'Rumors Bar', the patrons share stories that teeter between truth and rumours. It is however insinuated that there is more truth in their rumours than the government's version of the truth in the mass media. One of their house rules, always demanded by procedure, was that whenever somebody is telling a story, he has to declare whether his story is a rumour or the truth. When Matteos offers to tell a story about a 'hapless man who had proposed to a younger sister and was married to the older one instead' (Tuma, 2006, p. 122) to his table companions – Misikir and Tamrat – they challenge him to declare whether it is a true story or just another rumour. Matteos quips, "More true than the eight o'clock news", said Matteos safely. Any declaration had the chance of being more truthful than the news over the State controlled media." (Tuma, 2006, p. 123) It is ridiculous that stories told in a bar and under the influence of alcohol should be more reliable than the mainstream media. The use of the phrase 'State controlled media' implies total repression by the State.

4.2 The Mass Media in Defence of the Leadership

The mass media is used to protect and defend the allies of the rulers. In 'The Mob' an enraged mob charges at a man believed to be an escaping thief. The mob which typifies the exploited common citizens finds a unity of purpose in baying for the blood of the escaping man. Like the thief, the despotic leadership steals from the citizens hence the mob, in an action that corresponds to Marxist reactions of the oppressed, is out to vent out its pent up anger occasioned by exploitation in this society. In Tuma (2006), the narrator says that the mob:

Was made up of hundreds but surged like one, bonded by a frothing hate stemming out of many separate frustrations ... as it run after the victim, each and every one of its members felt alive, for once they had a purpose, for once they were not the helpless victims waiting for the sword to fall (p. 118)

The large numbers of the mob speaks to the majority exploited class and their surging 'like one' connotes their common socio-political challenges that also explain their hatred for despotic leadership fronted in this short story in the image of a thief. The mob is so determined that it cannot be deterred by questions from sections of the crowd asking it to pause and reflect on the accusations leveled against the man on the run. It has strong convictions that 'there must be a reason ... there is no mob without a reason' (p.119). The antagonism between the ruled and the rulers is made clearer through the home region of the escaping man. He hails from the 'North', a region which in all Tuma's short stories portends the seat of power. This is evident in their reaction when it is revealed to them that the purported thief hails from the 'North'. The narrator says that the mob fell back when one of the people pursuing the man screamed that their victim is from the 'North'. Their hesitation out of this realization implies that they were afraid of the government's wrath. The man is lynched anyway and 'the next day the government controlled newspaper reported at first page news the sad death of Dimisse Biru who was "killed by a mob of vagabonds who mistook him for a thief" as he was running to practice for the upcoming all-country athletic competition' (p. 121)

This extract proves that the authorities appreciate the potential of the mass media hence they have cunningly instituted a newspaper whose role is to disseminate news items tailored by the State operatives. Since the newspaper is at the service of the government, the information in the article is a cover up of the actual facts. The author relates the lynched 'thief' to the authorities by reserving a prime space for the news of his death 'at first page news' of the government controlled newspaper. This is a space that would ordinarily carry news items that are of prime importance to the authorities. Besides, the deep seated conflict between the authorities and the masses is further relayed in the malignant tone of the newspaper report that intimates that those responsible for the death of the 'athlete' were 'vagabonds' without explaining the reasons that occasion either their joblessness or homelessness. The newspaper therefore serves the interests of the authorities and ignores the plight of the subjugated citizens.

Like the 'thief' in 'The Mob' Tuma curves the leadership in the image of pickpockets in the character of Shasho Mamo in 'Incurable Hedonist'. Despite Mamo's luxurious life, he is discovered to be a pickpocket to the consternation of the prosecutor who can hardly understand how such a flashily dressed man can confess that he has never worked in any office but has been maintaining himself through pick-pocketing.

The accused has been living a life that resembles that of the leadership. Both the leadership and the pickpocket are exploitative and enjoy all their luxury at the expense of their victims. They both live off the sweat of others the unsuspecting and ignorant masses. The pick pocket epitomizes the face of a leadership that does not struggle with the people but still steals from them anyway and remains uncaught. The government subtly empties the pockets of the masses hence their persistent poverty, suffering, pain, starvation, and frustration. The judge down plays the accusation leveled against the pickpocket and instead lays all the blame on the helpless prosecutor. The narrator holds that ideally the pickpocket would have been given the death sentence however passing a death sentence, in accordance with the law, on the accused hedonist would suggest incrimination and a possible end to the lifestyle of the leadership and so the judgment remains hazy so as to protect the interests of the authoritarian rulers. The judgment magnifies the flaws of the prosecutor who has to be sacrificed to avoid a direct indictment of the overall leadership. In the same vein, the mass media ignores the actual news items of the case that would incriminate the despotic leadership and instead clings on a small mishap by the prosecutor to not only defend the authorities but also attack the critics of the government.

4.3 The Mass Media Answering Back the Despotic State's Critics

The press is equally used to answer back the critics of the skewed despotic criminal justice system. It fights alongside the authoritarian government instead of its fidelity to the truth. Lloyd (2017) holds that journalism encourages skepticism and that the peer-approved stance of a journalist is that of an outsider devoid of any potentially corrupting links to the subjects covered. This position presupposes an impartial profession at the service of the public but not one in league with any government authorities as is encountered in Tuma's short stories. The government prosecutor in 'Incurable Hedonist' bangles the case and the judge conveniently passes a six month sentence, to be served at the State pigsty, against the prosecutor for negligence of duty, wasting the time of the court and honouring petty criminals with grave accusations. The offence of the prosecutor is that he brought a simple pick-pocket to court on charges of serious crimes – hedonism. Apart from this being a mockery of the court system, it is meant to provide a semblance of justice in the court system and by extension the country. The government operatives are aware of the fact that one of the markers of democracy is a functional and impartial justice system and the error by the prosecutor, which indeed is a mockery of the negligence of the court officers, is very quickly turned into a godsend opportunity to show the world how fair and democratic the system is – they can even sentence their own prosecutor when he goes against the law. The narrator in Tuma (1993) says:

The next day one newspaper carried a scathing article entitled 'The prosecutor in the pigsty' in which it tried to lambast Amnesty International which had cast doubts about the fairness of revolutionary Ethiopian courts (pp. 131-132).

This excerpt demonstrates the government's spirited and conscious attempt to erase the tag of partiality in its courts which would otherwise contravene the making of a democratic system. That it is not just any other response but a 'scathing' article connotes a bitter and angry State and a mass media that shares in their high level of intolerance to criticism. Besides, it is curious that just one newspaper reported on a matter that would be as of great interest to the public as the predicament of a government prosecutor intimates a well choreographed scheme to fulfill the objective of the State. The fact that the mass media is used to advance the course of the State suggests that the mass media is subjective and cannot be relied on to access the truth. This phenomenon points to an authoritarian system since, posits Pasek (2006), democracy and independent media go together and there is always a bidirectional interaction between them. Immediately the mass media loses its objectivity, it becomes unreliable and a handy tool in the hands of the despotic leadership.

Those newspapers that are critical of the authoritarian regimes are indirectly economically emasculated because the citizens are also enticed and even covertly coerced into reading only government friendly newspapers. In a despotic society therefore, the mass media is expected to fight alongside the authorities and not the reverse. In the course of Sewyew's interrogation, in 'The Coward', one of the accusations leveled against him is that he has been constantly reading the newspapers which attack the government. His denial of this accusation leads to a raft of questions and responses which further highlight the State's firm grip on the citizens' freedom to information as brought out in the following conversation in Tuma (2006):

Sewyew: ...And following the declaration of the Prime Minister I never wasted time to read newspapers. Interrogator: Not even government ones?

Sewyew: Of course I read the government press. Who wouldn't? (p. 91)

By ensuring stringent measures on the consumers of non government friendly newspapers the leadership obviously shrinks the readership of critical newspapers which translates to low sales for them hence economic disempowerment of the government critics. Without the economic muscle, the critics are bound to find it difficult to challenge the despots and this is one avenue that perpetuates despotism.

4.4 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the position that despots appreciate the cogence of the mass media and hence cunningly infiltrate and strive to shrink the journalists' space to reinforce their grip on the masses. Superficially, the citizens are treated to what appears to be an independent media in a democratic society though the intrigues that beget the eventual mass media output meant for public consumption is shrouded in authoritarianism. The short stories project a context in which the mass media is manipulated to strengthen self-preservation of the leadership. The mass media often carry news items that have been either authored or edited by the authorities in a manner that pleases the despots hence the journalists are deprived of or abdicates their freedom to determine the content or manner of presentation of their pieces. In essence, the journalists are reduced to mere by-standers in their trade while the despots preoccupy themselves with 'news making'

The paper surmises that despots are cognizant of the cardinal role the mass media plays in the society especially in providing information about events, activities, and people and how such information influence the citizens' perceptions and actions. The author ridiculously portrays how the despots deliberately evade the tag of despotism by tactfully whitewashing the freedom of the mass media even as they stifle their operations through strategies like authoring and conveniently fabricating news items in a manner that suits their leadership after which they coerce the members of the fourth estate to present it to the citizens who are oblivious of the undercurrents of the news making by the State. The leadership also compromises the journalists who then, in sheer hypocrisy, abdicate their work ethics in a bid to appease the rulers. They become errand boys of the State zealously highlighting irrelevant news items at the expense of highlighting the causes of the plight of the oppressed citizens. Moreover, the press is often deployed to defend and protect the allies of the rulers and even answer back the critics of the government's justice system. Its role is to strive to portray the justice system as impartial hence conforming to the requirements of a democratic leadership. Besides, the authorities indirectly economically disempower those mass media channels that remain critical towards their leadership by enticing the citizens to consume only the output of those mass media pieces from government friendly outlets. All these efforts by the leadership are focused on the solidification of despotic rule while projecting a false democratic front. Behind the chicanery of the despots, Tuma directly blames the mass media for the continued occurrence of despotism in Ethiopia and by extension Africa.

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