

**Modernism and Covid-19 Pandemic: A comparative reading of pathology in Corona Virus Disease-19 pandemic and contemporary African prose**

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**Abstract**

*This study interrogates the pathological consequences of modernism with regards to the Covid-19 pandemic and selected works of prose fiction. It cross-examines the impact of modernism and its role in the genesis, transmission and accentuation of mental illness through the modern state and mechanization of humanity in the Covid-19 pandemic, Farah's *Close Sesame* (1983) and Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009). Using Ato Quason's calibrations, the study adopts a combination of theories from the social, political, psychological and cultural domains to scrutinize the assumption that art is either a mere expression of the unconscious or the artist's fantasies that seldom address the realities that affect the modern society. The eighteenth century saw the birth of a different perspective that was hailed as a genesis of sanity and social progress in Europe and the world at large. It was a modern era, a conversation that crowned rationality, and a break from tradition as pathways to civilization. Religion and insistence on traditional ways of thinking were confined to the private space given their emphasis on "irrationality" akin to insanity. Communal lifestyles and mass cultures were construed as "primitive" while universalization and globalization were upheld. Traditional forms of government were replaced by the modern state as a solution to problems faced by citizens. Similarly, the novel replaced traditional forms of literature such as poetry and drama; in spite of the new genre, modernist theories dismissed art as sheer fantasy, and worse, a self-defense mechanism exhibited by the sick artist, and may not be relied on to represent realities in the modern world. This is an analytical study that proceeds by a close textual reading of the primary and secondary texts to effect the comparison.*

**Key words:** *Covid-19 Pandemic, Mental Illness, Nuruddin Farah, Postmodernism, The Modern State*

## **Background of the Study**

Modernism has been hailed as an age of great advancements for the human race, particularly through advancements of technology, formal education and transformation of the political systems across the globe. Chaudhary (2013) takes this trajectory to appraise the merits of the modern age, particularly its impact on India, and observes that it has inculcated values of equality, freedom, and humanism, which facilitate formation of new relationships based on rationality that in turn contribute to the formation of a democratic political system. Chaudhary's (2013) study is one-sided as it hails the merits of modernization without consideration of its shortcomings. For example, the study asserts, "[m]odernization is usually associated with urban and industrial development. Chaudhary adds that during the 20th century, cities have grown as economic and cultural centres, and new technologies transformed almost every aspect of life" (p. 3) and argues that modernism was established by philosophers during the enlightenment on the premise that humans had the power to change their destiny (p. 2). Indeed, a number of thinkers have lauded the merits of modernism at the expense of tradition and religion. Caputo (2015) writes:

In pre-modern times, we said God is truth. In modernity, we separate religion from truth and redescribe it as a protected right...in modernity, religion is a matter of private conscience; it is formally a protected right even if it is materially a bit mad (p. 28).

Caputo (2015) in the above assertion consigns religion to the sphere of madness possibly because of its concern with abstract things. Descartes cited in Caputo (2015) accuses God of having committed injustice against the human race and would have to be summoned before the court of Rationality to answer to charges. This is what Jian (2020) describes as "modernity's fetishization of rationality and efficiency" (65) at the expense of humane attributes that make the human person. In the same way, some modernist thinkers describe literature as the product of insanity; hence sheer fantasy that does not address life's realities. Hart (1931) asserts that the victim of fantasy crosses the fence of reality to "the dreams that accompany sleep and the creations of an idle fancy have become the delusions of insanity" (160). In Harts opinion, the literary writer lives in own world without conventions and rules because they have crossed the borders from the real world; their work may not be a valid representation of reality. Hart suggests that although the modern world has challenges that arise from its inherent elevation of binaries, the literary artist is too absorbed in their "idle fancy" to represent these challenges. Further, Freud (1900) (cited from Eagleton, 1990) contends that there is close relationship between the artist and dreaming, for that reason; art is a self-defense mechanism to displace

personal weaknesses (199). Since modernism associates madness with irrationality, tacitly, the literary writer's work is discredited. One aspect that modernist thinkers do not account for is the semblance between historical realities and the postcolonial novel in the Global South. If the literary artists were mere neurotics, why would there be similitude between the modernist colonial realities and postcolonial novels? Given that modernist thought remains paramount in the contemporary society, could there be any similarities between the realities of Covid-19 pandemic and representations of works of fiction?

The Covid-19 pandemic reached Africa in March 2020 when the World Health Organization warned leaders in the African continent to institute the established measures to curtail the spread of the virus. Many African states adopted the measures such as night curfews, social distancing, wearing face masks, washing of hands and virtual classes to curb the spread of the virus. The implementation of these measures in most nations in the world exposed the weaknesses of the modern state. This study will compare the weaknesses of the modern state during the pandemic to two modernist novels, namely, Farah's *Close Sesame* and Chikwava's *Harare North*.

The choice of the two texts is justified because they present dictatorial states and hence right samples for investigating the debilitating potential of the modern state. The role of the police in such autocratic states makes the novels apt samples for interrogating mechanizing effects of modernism vis a vis the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas Farah's *Close Sesame* represents pioneer East African novelists, Chikwava's *Harare North* represents current Southern African novelists.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The development of empirical sciences in the modern age has bolstered skepticism about the capability of religion and literature to offer solutions or represent realities of life. Most modernist thinkers postulate that the artist is a neurotic casting doubt on his or her competence to represent realities. This comparative study interrogates the pathological consequences of modernism with regards to Covid-19 pandemic and selected works of prose fiction. It cross-examines the impact of modernism and its role in the genesis, transmission and accentuation of mental illness through the modern state and mechanization of humanity in the Covid-19 pandemic, Farah's *Close Sesame* (1983) and Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009). Using Ato Quayson's calibrations, the study adopts a combination of theories from the social, political, psychological and cultural domains to scrutinize the assumption that art is either a mere

expression of the unconscious or the artist's fantasies that seldom address the realities that affect the modern society.

### **Research Objectives**

- 1) Interrogate the nexus between literary fiction, fantasy and realities of life.
- 2) Analyse the nexus between modernism and mental illness
- 3) Compare the pathological consequences of modernism in Covid-19 season and African fiction.
- 4) Investigate whether mental illness arises from within or without an individual.

### **Empirical Literature Review**

The empirical review constitutes studies on modernism and the sanity of the literary artist, the nexus between modernism and mental illness, modernism and the genesis of Covid-19, and finally Covid-19 and mental health.

Studies have questioned the sanity of the literary artists in particular, and their eligibility to represent realities in the modern age. According to Feder (1980), artists make use of their inherent "madness as a vehicle to self-revelation" (xi); she reads their literature as "explorations of the deranged mind" (xii). Feder suggests that literary writers are sick people, with internal conflicts, whose therapy is writing. Other scholars single out modernist individuation as the predisposing factor to pathology, among modern people (Dean 2020, Moolla 2009). The individualism alienates artists and members of modern societies from moral precepts; hence exposure to madness (Taylor 2007). While these studies and Feder's criticize modernism and consider artists' works as mere confessions of psychopaths, this study compares artistic works to the Covid-19 pandemic to examine underlying modernist tenets.

There are empirical studies on the mental health of literary artists in the modern age. Jamison (1989) interviewed forty-seven artists and writers in Britain and found that a considerably higher percentage of them suffered from some types of mental illness than expected from population rates, most of which were affective disorders (125). Jameson's study is invaluable to the present study as it employs quantitative methods to interrogate previous postulations (Freud and Hart's). This study however seeks to find out whether the artists' neurosis is a disabling fantasy that hampers them from depicting the modernist realities.

A number of studies clarify attributes of modernism that pervade most contemporary phenomena (such as Covid-19 pandemic). Gladstone and Worden (2011) observe that modernism establishes the high/low divide that postmodernism contends with (294). This is also evident in Harding (2008)'s observation that modernity has the tendency to marginalize the so called "low culture"; hence narcissistic individuals and small clique of rich class that has little impact on the wellbeing of society. While the two studies generally focus on features of modernism, this study interrogates modernist attributes in Covid-19 pandemic and the selected works of fiction.

Aside from studies on modernism and artists, there are studies about the origin of the Corona virus. Platto, Wang and Carafoli (2021) observe that the rise and spread of the virus in Wuhan city stems from increased urbanization and Agricultural activities that brings humans in contact with wildlife. They add that the lack of buffer zones such as forests limit dilution of such viruses. Platto, Wang and Carafoli's study enriches this study as it points out a connection between the origin of Covid-19 and modernist attributes such as urbanization and Agricultural activities. However, the present study further interrogates modernist binaries and mental health issues in the covid-19 pandemic and selected works of fiction.

Some researchers contend that corona virus is a biological warfare weapon to bolster the modernist desire to dominate others. Skopic (2020) contends that the 2019 Wuhan Coronavirus is a destructive Biological Warfare Weapon and that the World Health Organization (WHO) already knows about it (1). This study is relevant to the present as study as it suggests that modernism is squarely to blame for all the effects of covid-19, including mental illness. While Skopic's focus is the nexus between modernity and biological warfare, the present study investigates the nexus between modernism and pathology in contemporary works of prose fiction, and Covid-19 pandemic.

Since the onset of Covid-19, several studies have interrogated its nexus to mental health issues. Racine et al. (2020) found that there was a prevalence of mental illness among adolescence during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the researchers point out the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic, there is no attempt to associate the challenges to modernism. This study fills this gap and extends the evidence to literary studies.

Studies have also found that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health issues arising from the mixed emotions such as fear of the unknown. Rubin and Wessley (2020) point out bizarre behaviours such as desire to empty shelves in the supermarkets and hoard food stuff in

the houses. Other studies aver that the discrimination that accompanied Covid-19 as an othering condition prelude to mental health issues (Ren et al., 2020). Whereas these studies find a nexus between Covid-19 pandemic and psychological disturbance, they do not unearth modernism as the real cause of the othering. The present study also finds a gap in the comparative aspect to interrogate the relevance of literature in the modern world.

In a study to show the nexus between marginalization and pathology in Chikwava's *Harare North*, Gunning (2015) observes that some otherized characters exhibit symptoms of spirit possession and dissociative identity disorder. Gunning expounds that Chikwava recognizes both African and Western strains of pathology. Gunning study enriches this study as it singles out migration as one of the contemporary phenomena through which attributes of modernism manifest. Gunning also suggests that literary artists can use their works, not as futile works of fantasy, but address social realities. This study extends Gunning's study through a comparison of Covid-19 pandemic to works of fiction to interrogate the relevance of literature to modern audiences.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The interpretive grid for this study was Calibrations theory— a fine-tuned tool for textual close-reading that oscillates rapidly between domains—the literary-aesthetic, the social, the cultural, and the political in order to explore the mutually illuminating heterogeneity of these domains when taken together” (Quayson, 2003, p. xi), calibration facilitated the flawless interaction of theorists who occupy different academic disciplines to interrogate the demerits of modernism. Postmodernism as the umbrella theory that interrogated modernist ideals, but postcolonialism and psychological concepts such as Laing (1960)'s the *unembodied self* and Kohut and Wolf (1978)'s *under stimulated self*-assisted in the analysis of othering and pathological conditions in people and characters.

The major postmodernist concepts were Nietzsche's concept of the modern state (p. 382); Heidegger's' theorization of technology as “forcing of being” or mechanization of humanity (p. 54); and Foucault (1961) problematization of otherness as madness (p.7).

According to Nietzsche, the modern state is not a benevolent invention as it unilaterally adopts powers to transgress aspects of culture. Within the nations, it uses the police to violate rights of citizens, creates classes and brutalizes citizens; while externally, the state pursues unnecessary conquests and revenge (p. 382). This study adopted Nietzsche's concept of the

modern state to interrogate the failures of the modern state during the Covid-19 pandemic and two modernist novels, namely, Farah's *Close Sesame* and Chikwava's *Harare North*

Heidegger in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" observes that technology tends to dehumanize humankind such that human persons are just arranged and organized like objects. He writes:

Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by to be immediately at hand to indeed stand there just so that it may be on call for further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it a standing reserve. (17)

Heidegger in this passage suggests that humanity in the modern age tends to view human persons as "supplies in the storeroom" or pieces of inventory to be ordered, conscripted or assembled. Everything is viewed as source of energy; human persons are just a means to technological procedures. This study adopts Heidegger's' views to interrogate the dehumanization or mechanization tendencies of modernism during the Covid-19 pandemic and two modernist novels.

Foucault's (1961) demonstrates how the European society in the 17<sup>th</sup> century associated any person who did not behave according to the cultural norms with insanity. Difference was therefore stigmatized and many vagabonds and the destitute were confined to the mental asylum (p. 7). For Foucault, the modernist creation of classes resulted in class othering, which is insanity. This study adopts Foucault's concept of class othering to interrogate madness as social construct rather than a medical condition.

## **Methodology**

The study employed narrative analysis qualitative design. Qualitative research design entails textual study in which data presented for analysis is collected from primary texts. Data from secondary sources enabled the theoretical comprehension and qualitative analysis of primary texts. Narrative analysis is a type of qualitative research design. May (2002) observes that narrative analysis "views narratives as interpretive devices through which people represent themselves and their worlds to themselves and others" (p. 12). Narrative analysis design seeks to understand human experience and social phenomena (in this context limitations of modernism) through analysis of the content of stories. It uses field texts such as stories, journals, and interviews as units of analysis to understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives.

These materials were read, reviewed and selected depending on their pertinent contribution to arguments on modernism, otherness, the fragmented self and insanity in the field of literature. Data from primary texts were collected from the purposively sampled narratives on the nexus between modernism, fragmentation and madness. I engaged in content analysis to study the two texts applying close-reading into the phenomena being studied. Patterns were established, trends and relationships from data gathered was made to arrive at findings on how modernism affects the self. The study was purely library based and data was collected from journalistic and literary articles and two primary texts for analysis. Other aspects of methodology are as follows:

### **The Sampling Procedure**

The study adopted purposive sampling technique in which four African novels were read and the two texts deliberately sampled based on setting (geographical and cultural) and presence of modernist ideas, and pathological attributes. This consideration was aimed at assisting the researcher to examine their connectedness and how they are textualised. Two texts were chosen one from Eastern and another one from Southern Africa to ensure ample sample size and socio-geographical variety to enable digging into the complexity of modernism and pathological aspects such as the fragmented self and madness and causal-effect trajectory.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data for the study was collected by close reading of Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*, Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* and journalistic articles on events during the Covid-19 pandemic. Primary data was enriched by secondary data from studying, reviewing and selecting of scholarly and literary articles from refereed journals and books from online sources. Secondary data propped the study in forming a case for modernism, postmodernism Covid-19, otherness, pathology as literary sites potent with ways of studying the clinical from both the social and the political. In other words, secondary data from books bolstered knowledge of major theories such as Quayson's calibration, postmodernism, Laing's unembodied self and postcolonialism to help in the analysis of primary data.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

A study of certain concepts of postmodernism, postcolonial and psychological criticism guided the researcher in comprehending modernism, the modern state, and mechanization of humanity, otherness, and mental illness during the Covid-19 season and in the two literary texts. Two strands of postcolonial criticism guided the analysis and interpretation of data: Said's orientalism and Fanon's concept of otherness and madness. The concepts of psychological criticism: Laing's theory of the *unembodied self* and Kohut and Wolf's

*understimulated self* were crucial in analysing fragmented selves and other aspects of pathology in characters. The concepts were essential in analysing identified fragmented and mad characters and interrogate the nexus between their condition and modernist attributes such as the modern state and mechanization of humanity.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I carried out the study within a number of limitations that will not essentially rescind the validity of research findings:

The first drawback was the use of qualitative research design where I gathered data from primary and secondary sources. Self-reported data may not be autonomously confirmed except through relentless vigilance to eradicate subjectivity by the researcher and their sources.

Secondly, the purposive sampling technique that was adopted in this study heavily relied on personal judgment and I might have chosen both sources of data that were suited by biases. It is judicious to take cognizance of the fact that that personal judgment is disposed to error.

Thirdly, there was paucity of prior literary studies on postmodernist readings of primary texts and the demerits of modernism in the contemporary society. Most writers seem to have embraced modernism with its promise of individuality and political stability through the invention of the modern state. Although the subjects of the two texts were very clear with regards to demerits of modernism in Africa, literary studies on the concept remained sparse.

Fourthly, there was scarce literature on the nexus between stylistic choices and the fragmented self and madness. As much as data on language use in literature was available, literary studies on stylistic devices typical of the fragmented self and madness were scarce.

Finally, the supposition that literary characters have a semblance with human persons with minds or selves that collapse in the event of otherness (as suggested by this study) is only believable if the novel is regarded as a modernist literary form that expresses content with scientific exactitude. Nevertheless, imaginative characters are creations that may not react to conditions as human beings do.

### **Key Results**

i). There is nexus between social realities and literary fiction; therefore, literature is reflection of real experiences in the modern world. It was interesting to find modernist tenets such as high and low culture, the modern state and its excesses, othering and pathology both in the Covid-19 pandemic and literary fiction. In as much as the literary artist relies on fantasy as stylistic device, he or she addresses social realities that affect modern societies. For example, the police during Covid-19 reinforce strict measures that accentuate othering of vulnerable citizens, which results in mental illness (Panchal, Kamal & Cox, 2021). In Farah's *Close Sesame*, the colonial police attack a Somalia village, shoot cattle and poison the wells. Because of this political marginalization, Deeriye, the leader of the clan experiences psychic collapse, and starts hallucinating (41). These two episodes embody the modernist aspect of high/ low culture that Gladstone and Worden (2011) postulate. The poor citizens and Somali subjects are the other because of class and race difference. These and other illustrations in the findings of this study interrogate Freud's concept of "art and dreaming" and overturn Hart's association of literature with wanton idleness.

ii) There is a nexus between modernism and strains of mental illness. As soon as the world health organisation declared the onset of the pandemic, many states instituted measures that conventionalized othering, which is otherwise morally unconventional. According Staszak (2008), othering is the inability to see people that are different as part of one's community (9). Fanon (1961, 182) suggests that othering (particularly political and racial) causes the collapse of the victim's psyche resulting in mental illness. The modern states adopted Covid-19 pandemic measures such as quarantine, wearing of facemasks and social distancing to institutionalize othering practices. Taskin (2021) reports police violence in India, "[d]uring the lockdown, use of force by the police and police brutality were commonly reported, even in cases of minor infringement of the strict lockdown rules. This inevitably led to confrontations between the police and the people" (p. 1). Silva (2020) contends that that during covid-19 pandemic human interactions have been "forcefully altered, either through implemented social distancing or lockdowns, to limit the spread of the virus" (484). This reduction of people's movement, and the duration and socialization among them is tantamount to imposition of counterfeit barriers of that can lead to friction and discord. Similarly, the colonial police otherise Africans in Farah's *Close Sesame* by poisoning their wells to kill cattle (p. 41). In Chikwava's *Harare North*, the state abandons the narrator after using him to kill opposition supporters. As a result of political othering:

Panchal, Kamal and Cox (2021) observe that many young people have experienced mental illness as a result of Covid-19 pandemic. The major strain of mental illness is understimulated *self*. According to Kohut and Wolf (1978), victims of the *understimulated self* cannot feel happy until they turn to sexual perversions and alcoholism (p. 418). Depression has been a common aspect of mental health with some victims committing suicide. For example, a woman poisoned her three children and committed suicide in Naivasha after losing her job at the onset of the pandemic. Deeriye is a victim of the fragmented self. He isolates himself after Italian incursion and starts seeing hallucinations. Characters also suffer from the *unembodied self* in the two novels. According to Laing, such mentally ill patients refrain from all direct participation in any aspect of life in the world and its only function is to observe, criticize and control what the body is experiencing (p. 69). The narrator of *Harare North* and Deeriye in *Close Sesame* are unable to marry. They are unembodied and only interested in images. And this is why Deeriye sees visions.

iii). It was evident that modernity has mechanized humanity. According to Heidegger, modernism mechanizes humanity by turning them into mere human resources (p. 54). Griffin (2017) underscores these dehumanizing traits when he points out modernist aspects among the Nazis (362). They obey Hitler's commands regardless of their unethical nature. Similarly, the police (during the Covid-19 pandemic) obey commands of the leaders and do not think about the morality of their actions. They beat and kill six people in the first 10 days of the pandemic in Kenya in the pretext that they are executing the law.

In *Close Sesame*, the narrator says that the colonial police administrator uses "yes or no questions" and Deeriye is not given room to explain. This coldness reiterates Jian (2020)'s contention with regard to elevation of efficiency and "celebration of power" at the expense of humanity. The Italian is the "self" and Deeriye the "other" to be treated like a misbehaved child before a responsible father. Following this, the Italians send a punitive expedition to Deeriye's community; they poison the wells and using bazookas, shoot cattle to cripple the clan economically (p. 41).

In *Harare North*, ZANU PF militia kill opposition supporters just because the leader, Mugabe has ordered it. They break all traffic rules and do what they want because the state supports them. During one of their trips, they tell the driver, "[k]eep foot down on the juice, Tom, if anything happen, we are there to witness for you if police ask questions" (Chikwava,

2009, p. 18). Since they are working for the ruling party, the Green Bombers are the true citizens with “privileges” to break the law.

iv). There is a nexus between modernism and othering

The police (acting as automatons during the covid-19 season) treats citizen who go home during curfew hours as “political others.” This reiterates Heidegger and Griffin’s association of modernism with mechanization and coercion of humankind. On orders from superiors, the police flog, shoot and kill six people on the first day of curfew; Human Rights Watch reported:

Kenya’s curfew to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic went into effect on March 27 2020. Within the first 10 days, police used excessive force across the country, causing the deaths of at least six people and leaving many others injured [...]. The 26 people Human Rights Watch interviewed included victims of police beatings, witnesses, relatives of the victims, including those killed, and activists involved in seeking justice for the victims and their families (para 20).

Police use of excessive force in the above episode has a semblance with Farah’s *Close Sesame* where colonialism, a modernist project, treats Deeriye’s subjects as “political others” (p. 41). Their cattle are shot and wells poisoned because colonialists view themselves as superior and Africans as “primitive.”

In Chikwava’s *Harare North* the Zimbabwean state treats the opposition as the “political others.” They use armed militias (the narrator) to torture and kill opposition supporters because they uphold democratic ideology (p. 8).

v). The classes created by the modern state create othering of the poor and brand them as insane. Foucault (1961) observes that in Europe, “poor vagabonds, criminals and the unemployed” (p. 7) were confined away from society’s presence in the pretext that they were deranged minds. Anyone who looked miserable was undesirable and viewed as mad. Gladstone and Worden refer to this as the high/low class divide characteristic of modernism. Moah (2014) elaborates that among most Ghanaians, poverty is madness because it makes the individual vulnerable to acts that “normal” people would not do for their self-preservation (212). She gives the example of some poor people who help transport hard drugs by swallowing them.

The rich families reject Beatrice during the Covid-19 pandemic season because she is poor and therefore presumed to have Covid-19. She says that her life changed the minute the government announced the first confirmed Covid-19 pandemic case in the country:

Beatrice is a 'stone lady', a name that describes ladies from informal settlements who sit on stones in leafy suburbs of Nairobi and wait for middleclass citizens to offer them casual jobs [...]. Beatrice says that her life changed the minute the government announced the first confirmed Covid-19 pandemic case in the country. 'All my employers called me and cancelled their contracts. (Ijecha, 2020, para 3, 5).

Covid-19 pandemic reinforces class stereotypes because the middle class and rich view the poor as careless and notorious spreaders of the disease. Chopra and Arora (2020) observe that Covid-19 pandemic accentuated social stigma in Italy to severe levels that Italian parents considered Chinese restaurants madhouses [my emphasis] (284) where their children would not go. As immigrants, the Chinese are placed in the low social stratum, as carriers of the virus.

Whereas Chikwava's narrator migrates to England, Beatrice has migrated from his rural home to Nairobi city to combat poverty by doing domestic work in richer homes. Covid-19 pandemic elevates the class divide when the richer families otherize Beatrice as a possible disease spreader. The containment measures underscore social distancing to legitimize class othering in Beatrice's context.

Similarly, the state in *Harare North* criminalizes poor Zimbabwean immigrants in England; they have no documents and thus overtaxed or arrested by police anyhow. They are given odd jobs for example, BBCs in England (p. 41). They live in squalid conditions and according to Foucault, modernism stigmatizes such destitution as madness.

The narrator in *Harare North* plans to go and visit his childhood friend, Shingi. In his cousin's house, there is a computer and internet, but because of class otherness, he says, "I don't even try to touch it" (24). When his cousin, Paul allows him to browse, he realizes that there is nothing on internet for a low class semi-illiterate like him whose job will be to "swing the hammer or pick axe or push the broom" (24). The narrator is extremely haunted by his low class in England. Similarly, poor families the world over have been unable to attend online lessons during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most universities in Africa have resolved to offer online teaching using applications such Zoom, Google Meet and Big Blue Button. Students from remote and poor parts of the country either cannot afford computers and smartphones or their areas have no internet connectivity. Those who acquire the gadgets for the first time feel out of place and cannot "mute" or "unmute" for effective learning. In elementary school, the Kenya

government tried to disseminate virtual learning and it was confounding to discover that only ten per cent of families had access to television because their regions have no electricity (Joseph, 2020, para 1).

vi). Madness arises from without the individual; according to Roberts (1980), madness is subject to cultural and ideological underpinnings rather than individual weaknesses (13). Moah (2014) expounds that the squalor in which poor persons live expose them to pathological conditions. Deeriye in *Close Sesame* is sane until Italians ambush through acts of political and racial othering. He is shocked by the incursion and starts experiencing hallucinations (p. 41); had othering not happened, he would have remained sane.

Most young people were sane in Kenya and India until police started their othering practices during the Covid-19 pandemic season. Panchal, Kamal and Cox (2021) observe that many young people have experienced mental illness as a result of Covid-19 pandemic.

The narrator in *Harare North* remains sane until the Zimbabwean state abandons him because of his poverty. His psyche collapses and becomes *unembodied*: he has never had desire for marriage, (p. 74) but loves *imagos* and activities that abuse sex such as prostitution

Zimbabwean undocumented immigrants in England are viewed as mad because of the indigence they live in. The narrator says, “I can sniff them natives squatting under low damp ceiling like thieves that have just been catch” (p. 30). For Foucault and Moah, modernism construes poverty as madness; insanity is hence a social construction.

## **Conclusions**

This study was a comparative reading of the pathological consequences of modernism in Covid-19 pandemic and selected works of African prose fiction to interrogate previous studies that associate literature with fantasy and dreams that limit its representation of social realities. The study interrogated the impact of modernism and its role in the, transmission and accentuation of mental illness through the modern state and mechanization of humanity in African Prose fiction and Covid-19 pandemic Season. Using postmodernist ideas of Heidegger, Nietzsche and Taylor, the paper extended the conversation that modernism debilitates citizens, mechanizes humanity and causes self-fragmentation with reference to states’ handling of Covid-19 pandemic and treatment of citizens in Farah’s *Close Sesame* (1983) and Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2009). The two novels were purposively selected because all the novelists

selected from two African regions display an awareness of the intersection between modernism, mechanization of humanity and how their attendant othering occasion pathological conditions in the society. The study, thus, concerned itself with postmodernist readings into othering attributes of modernism in two literary texts, their pathological consequences and drew comparisons with the Covid-19 pandemic season.

The main premise upon which the study was based was that in spite of its hyped merits on society both live experiences (such as Covid-19 pandemic) and literary representations confirm that modernism has had devastating pathological consequences on individuals through deliberate rejection of tradition and invention of the state and bureaucracies. With reference to Taylor (2007), the individualization of the self is a departure from traditional cohesion that renders the self-fragmented and ineffective. Othering and marginality result in diverse strains of madness and the fragmented self. In their attempt to deconstruct modernism the authors of the primary texts also demonstrate Foucault's claims of modernist attempt to construct madness through class structures.

By following how these two works and Covid-19 pandemic season interrogate modernism, the study has demonstrated how literature utilizes fantasy to represent social realities such as the modern state and attendant attributes. Mechanization of humanity, for instance has occasioned varied forms of social chaos that incline individuals to mental confusion as they attempt to circulate differently in societies that have fixed notions about social progress. As the study interacted with these texts by two African writers; from different regions of Africa; and settings both in East and Southern Africa, this paper focused on the discourses of demerits of modernism, and how it augments pathological conditions such as the fragmented self and madness through the spectacles of postmodernist tenets by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault.

The study sought to interrogate the hyped psychoanalytic belief that literary works are fantasy and dreams, and fill in the sparse critical scholarship on postmodernist critique of the demerits of modernism in literature and politics in the light of its glorified contribution to social progress of the world through invention of the modern state and bureaucracy. The study has achieved this through the analysis of two modernist novels, Farah's *Close Sesame* and Chikwava's *Harare North*, and actual management of Covid-19 pandemic by the Kenyan and Indian state.

The study was able to conclude that through mechanization of the police and the army (in the works of fiction and Covid-19 pandemic); modernism dehumanizes and uses them to otherize subjects as asserted by Nietzsche (2013). By referring to Fanon (1961), it was apparent that modern subjects experience diverse pathological conditions such as depression, the unembodied self, the unburdened self and clinical madness. Through invention of classes, as Nietzsche asserts, the state manages to condemn some citizens to “madness”. In other words, the state invents madness as a social construct. It is erroneous for most scholars to appraise modernism without pointing out its contribution in class othering, political othering and madness. As much as postmodernism does not provide solutions to the deficiencies of modernism, it highlights the demerits to empower society to exercise caution with regards to application of modernist ideals.

There is need to shift attention from the uncritical appraisal of modernism and concentrate more on its social and political demerits that lead to commodification of humanity, misuse of technology to invent biological weapons, marginalization of the humanities such as literature to stifle criticism, and marginalization of groups that result in and psychological disturbances. This way, the society will incorporate some aspects of tradition to mitigate the negative effects of modernism. The paper utilized the Jamesonian “political interpretation of literary texts” (p. 1) which sees narratives as social symbols since for him “certain texts have social and historical—sometimes even political—resonance” (p. 1). In so doing, the study was able to critique modernism, and associate strands of otherness, strains of madness and the fragmented self with rationalism, the very foundation from which modernism arises.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Policy Implication**

Modernism has been hailed as the authentic prescription to the human predicament of perennial poverty, disease, ignorance and liberation of the mind from “archaic” traditions that at times uphold belief in the superstitions to accentuate mental bondage. Communal forms of art such as oral literature, poetry and drama, and moral values that encouraged individuals to subscribe to a socially constituted morality (Taylor, 2007) have been replaced by the novel and rationality respectively. However, modernist thinkers (Freud and Hart) associate the novel, like other genres of literature, with mere fantasy and dreams—removed from social realities. Modern education therefore inculcates rationalist principles to dispel and supplant ignorance and superstition with happiness in our lives. But to what extent is this true? The present study on the demerits of modernism was limited to a comparison of the imperfections of modernism in two novels, namely, *Chikwava’s Harare North* and Farah’s *Close Sesame* with the state’s

handling of Covid-19 pandemic. The following areas can form new directions for further scholarship:

- i). Investigate the role of virtual learning applications in accentuation of pathological conditions such as the unembodied self. If (according to Laing) a schizoid is a patient without interest in the love of real human beings, to what extent do virtual lessons and social media destroy our love for real teachers and friends?
- ii). Demonstrate the extent to which class othering, a pertinent aspect of modernism, causes similar pathological conditions. Although this study has demonstrated how political and racial othering directly result in clinical madness, class othering has just been described as madness itself.
- iii). Investigate Heidegger's "forcing of being" or mechanization of humanity in our civil service and educational institutions, its impact on mental health of workers and how it can be remedied.
- iv). Find strategies for reconciliation of modernism with tradition to alleviate its pathological consequences on individuals. The modernist emphasis on individuality and individualism has had pathological consequences on society.
- v) Investigate the role of traditional and modern genres of literature —oral literature, drama poetry and the novel— on the mental wellness of individuals in society. This study suggests that literature is not wanton fantasy, but an aesthetic medium through which writers express social realities.

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