

Reading the Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison as an Allegory of Post-Independent African Predicament

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Abstract

*The study examines *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993) by Jack Mapanje, a book committed to the protest against the long-term rule of the autocrat Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda in Malawi. It aims at portraying the poet's work as an allegory of the lingering effects preventing the continent's political and economic agency. Anchored thus in the postcolonial theory, the survey unveils the lingering causes underlying the continent's perpetual quest for political sovereignty and economic freedom. It is essentially argued in the article that the great deal of the responsibility of the post-colonial plight in Africa, as the Malawian case has proven it, falls to African leaders who failed in due course due to their dictatorial and despotic tendencies.*

Keywords: *allegory, dependency theory, post-colonial, metaphor, African poetry.*

Résumé :

*L'étude examine *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* de Jack Mapanje, un livre engagé dans la protestation contre le long règne de l'autocrate Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda au Malawi. Elle vise à présenter l'œuvre du poète comme une allégorie des causes persistantes qui empêchent l'Afrique post-coloniale d'acquérir une véritable autonomie politique et économique. Ancrée dans une perspective théorique postcoloniale, l'étude met en lumière les principales causes sous-jacentes de la quête perpétuelle du continent pour la souveraineté politique et la prospérité économique. Il est essentiellement soutenu tout au long de l'article qu'une grande partie de la*

responsabilité du sort post-colonial de l'Afrique, comme le prouve le cas du Malawi, incombe aux dirigeants africains qui ont échoués en raison de leurs tendances dictatoriales et despotiques.

Mots clés : *allégorie, métaphore, poésie africaine, post-colonial, théorie de la dépendance*

Introduction

The quest for a genuine freedom has for long been a lingering preoccupation nurturing the daily life of the African people. The recent political turmoil in the West African sub-region is therefore the consequence of the desire of the masses, political leaders and military to hold their destiny as insecurity has grown as a real threat for them. The dictatorship of Dr. Banda in early post-independent Malawi has therefore provided a rich poetic mine to Jack Mapanje, like a true poet in traditional Africa whose gift comes from the people¹, to try to improve the lot of the Malawian people.

There is indeed no cut distinction between text and context in African literature. Like all the literary forms, poetry is a literary genre that authorizes the African writers to use “powerful words to x-ray deep thoughts about man and society.” (C. Ogunyemi, 2011, p. 228) Mapanje has consequently drawn his literary imagination from the tormented postcolonial Malawian society and is able to produce from it a work of art that is committed to its wellbeing. He has thus committed his poetic imagination to the subservience of Banda’s political regime that has proven to be ineffective for the Malawian people’s wellbeing.

¹ In traditional Africa, a poet does not create art just for art’s sake. He or she is expected to embody a utilitarian role. This implies to produce works that participate to the welfare of the society.

This essay then focuses on Mapanje's metaphorical depiction of Banda's despotic regime and how it has contributed significantly to prevent the Malawian people from attaining an authentic independence including a genuine political freedom and economic prosperity. From the Malawian case, the study seeks to portray dictatorship and other autocratic forms of ruling as the major infringement to the harvest of independence dreams² in post-colonial Africa.

1. A metaphor of the tradition of dictatorship and oppression

The wagtails are birds that covers both metaphorically and overtly Mapanje's second collection of poems. The omnipresence of these birds in the poet's work is quite meaningful. This ubiquity is partly justifiable by the birds' relevant contribution to the portrayal of the difficult situation prevailing in post-colonial Malawi. Wagtails are used thus by the poet metaphorically to depict a tradition of oppression and instability that dominates post-independent Malawi and post-colonial Africa as a general rule.

To read the collection *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* alone will not allow a full apprehension of Mapanje's literary achievement if due consideration is not given to his previous work. The poet emerged on the modern African poetic scene with the collection *Of Chameleon and God* published in 1981 as attempt to deconstruct a political scene that serves the leader and his followers while the Malawian masses starve and remain perilous. This is the point of view of Anthony Nazombe when he admits that "the prologue with which Mapanje's second book of poems opens serves, (...) to

² The harvest of independence dreams refers here to the African people's aspiration to get rid of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural alienation.

establish a connection between the two volumes” (1994, p.89) Likewise, Reuben Makayiko Chirambo’s comment on the thematic concern permeating the collection is quite evocative in this regard. It lays not only the foreground of Banda’s ruling, but also the hostile and woeful environment from which the book emerged. He writes this:

The government of former president-for-life Dr. H.K. Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) in Malawi was a dictatorship that relied on coercion as well as mobilization of grassroots popular support and consent to maintain itself in power for 30 years (1964–1994). The regime’s coercive tactics included draconian censorship of stories, poems, plays, songs, and other creative work that contained any critical commentary of the dictatorship. The ruling party also made liberal use of detention without trial, the torture of political opponents, extra-judicial killings, and forced exile against those it deemed a threat to its survival. Banda’s regime appropriated citizens’ cultural activities producing a political discourse that popularized and legitimized the dictatorship in ways that resonate with Antonio Gramsci’s definition of hegemony. (2007, p.139)

Chirambo’s words rightly attest that Mapanje’s poetry has emerged from a quite hostile environment. His poetic imagination is nurtured by the suffering of his countrymen under the yoke of Banda’s oppressive regime. The Malawian poet has indeed committed his literary imagination to a deep reflection on the despotic regime of Hastings Kimuzu Banda which oppressed and exploited the Malawian masses for thirty

years. Such a woeful environment therefore justifies the poet's use of various metaphors and imageries to convey his thoughts. However, though the poet used obscure devices³ to overcome censorship and even reprisal, he was finally arrested and sent to jail after the collection *Mapenje*. As a detainee in the Mikuyu prison⁴ for about four years, the prison was unable to muzzle the poet. From the jail, he grew more eager against the dictatorial regime. The years spent in prison have been thus useful to the poet in mapping Banda's dictatorship and compiled it within the collection of poems titled *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993) once he was released without any trial in 1991.

As the continuation of his previous work, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993) scrutinizes more overtly the dictatorial regime pointing out its ineffectiveness. This was made possible for the book was released from the poet's exile in Britain where he could not worry about reprisals from his foe. Throughout the collection the poet allegorically uses various metaphors from animals and other elements of nature to condemn the brutal regime and celebrate by the same token his people's hope for political and economic freedom.

Going through the collection *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* allows to come across various relevant endogenous reasons explaining the present conditions of post-colonial African nations. The Malawian political scene that inspired the different poems compiled in the collection offers a long story to tell so much the model is replicated in the entire continent. The political instability dominating the nation is in

³ Mapenje is known to have used several animal metaphors in the collection to challenge Banda's dictatorship. This aims as Alison MacFarlane says "to subvert this system without producing politically controversial works" (2002, p.1)

⁴ Mikuyu Prison is the name given to the national and famous prison of Malawi. It was known during the rule of Banda to serve as a detention and torture camp for the opponents to Banda's regime.

the poet's view one of the major infringements preventing the continent's attainment of a genuine freedom. Post-independent Malawi has experienced an unprecedented dictatorship as the British oppressor has just left over the territory. As the first president of post-independent Malawi, Dr. Banda ruled the country for thirty long and uninterrupted years going from 1964 to 1994. This long-term rule was far to be a quit river with the Malawian masses caught between the anvil and the hammer within the hands of the blacksmith in the forging of a new life.

President Banda's long-term ruling has generally been associated with a period of high political turmoil in post-independent Malawi. Nicole K. Drumhiller and Casey Skvorc portray the Malawian president as being "among the few members of the medical community who transitioned from doctor to dictator or doctator." (2022, p.9). The neologism "doctador" which is a combination of the terms doctor and dictator used here is quite evocative of the oppressiveness of the civil leader. Syned Mthatiwa equally contends the disillusion brought about by Banda's coming to power. He maintains for example that "Banda came as a liberator of his people from colonial bondage. He championed the struggle against colonialism, but when freedom was won, he turned against his own people --oppressing them." (2009, p.14) Far from being the freedom fighter and the nationalist figure that he was expected to be, president Banda is thus portrayed as a leader who led his country to an unprecedented turbulent zone just as the British left.

Mapanje's poetry emerged therefore as a poignant voice against this dictatorial environment in a moment of great confusion. His poetry is thus an allegory to Banda's despotic regime which prevented the Malawian masses from reaping

their independence dreams. This use of allegory within a very hostile environment fits perfectly the definition of post-colonial allegory provided by Bill Ashcroft et al. It represents according to the authors "a common strategy of resistance in post-colonial texts." (Ashcroft et al., 2001, p.11) It is, in other words, a device through which the poet can hide himself while fighting for his people. This is because dictatorship, oppression and violence stand as the common ills dominating post-colonial Africa. The writers who emerged in post-colonial era have therefore committed their work to the quest for better living conditions for their people. Identifying themselves as the champion of the masses they have endowed their works with various allegories as a camouflage to avoid reprisals while challenging oppressive regimes.

Being aware of the hostile environment in which he has to produce his work, Jack Mapanje has endowed his poetry with these camouflage armors. His poetry, as Mthathiwa contends, is chiefly characterized by its representation of "creatures from the world of nature – mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects – for close association with life experiences in various contexts and situations and with people he views with contempt and disgust and those he regards with tenderness and compassion." (2009, p.13) Human beings as African tradition has generally proven through various African communities, live in harmony with nature. In most of the tales, myths and legends, people interact symphonically with animals and the elements of nature.

Though human beings and animals are unable to handle an effective communication act, both sides concur significantly to balance the ecosystem. In Mthathiwa's words, in these traditional communities as it is offered to notice, "animals act as mirrors of human society and behavior" (2009, p.18) This

proximity allows human to appropriate animal values when they are found relevant and reject them when they are opposed to human norms. The lion is appreciated for instance for its strength and power, while the eagle is praised for its leadership and strong vision. Though the collection is pervaded with various allegorical allusions, bird metaphors are offered prime of choice. Bird metaphors are used to agree with Mthatiwa,

as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, exiled Malawians and other victims of Malawi's dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, as well as victims of other oppressors and despots around the world. Where metaphors are used in this way the aim is to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims, while emphasising the oppressors' evil and injustice. (2009, p.13)

As it is offered to notice birds play an important role in Mapanje's poetry in general and especially within the collection *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*. The fact that the book's title alludes overtly to birds is quite meaningful. The chattering wagtails that the title of the book refers to are actually birds that the poet uses to convey various symbolic meanings throughout the collection to condemn a brutal regime. The prominent role assigned by the poet to bird metaphors in the collection as Mthatiwa agrees "derives from his familiarity with birds and their ubiquity in Malawi and in Malawi's oral tradition, but also his actual encounter with them during his imprisonment and thereafter." (2009, p.16) The wagtails are birds known for their characteristic plumage and

tails pumping behavior. They are also known for their melodious song and are associated to luck and fortune. The use of this animal metaphor is quite determining in the poet's camouflage strategy. Hiding himself behind the melodious song produced by the wagtails' choir is an ideal camouflage for the poet to challenge the political regime of his country.

The cover page of the collection that presents a wagtail near a window is quite evocative in this regard of the crucial role-playing bird metaphor in Mapanje's work. Through its position on the picture, it is not possible to know whether the wagtail is inside or outside the building. From this ambiguous position the wagtail seems thus to view both from and through the windows. This allegory authorizes the poet to assert the freedom that poetry provides him like the wagtail to sing. Thus, beyond the prison cells Mapanje commits the song of freedom of his people to those who have ears to hear. Benefitting from this camouflage, the poet is able to criticize Banda's regime and its wrong doings.

The chattering wagtails can thus be viewed as a metaphor that crystalizes alone the cruelty and the oppressiveness of president Banda's despotic regime. They represent a lens allowing the poet to protest against oppression, dictatorship and abuse of power on the one hand, and resistance to oppressive forces on the other. The prologue is a brief summary providing a complete overview of the different subject matters tackled by the poet throughout the collection. As the title of the collection and the prologue offer to notice, the poet has decided to name openly the plight which he and the masses in Malawi are suffering from. The persona

depicts a world of terror from which the chattering wagtails make their voice heard:

From the vault of Chingwe's Hole
Come these chattering wagtails
Desperate voices of fractured souls
Nesting on desert walls of prisons
And exiles, afflicted or self-imposed,
Counting stubborn beads, deprived
Laughters and ceaseless tears shed
In the chaos of invented autocracies
Now darkly out of bounds beyond
These tranquil walls of York.
Justice! (J. Mapanje, 1993, p.1)

The above lines give an account of the context from which Mapanje's book of poems is written. The prologue unveils a fierce condensation of the autocratic tradition prevailing in Malawi. The persona depicts a country dominated by a despotic regime oppressing with an unprecedented ferocity the people. As these introductory lines clearly show, post-independent Malawi during the long-rule of Banda has been characterized by abuse of power, oppression and injustice of all kinds. Thus, contrary to the melodious songs of wagtails in general, those in Mapanje's book are quite peculiar. The wagtails within the collection are nothing but the Malawian people. Their songs are a reification that portray voices shared between the poet himself, the other inmate prisoners in Mikuyu prison, and the Malawian masses. Nazombe admits indeed that "The chattering wagtails of the second book's title are not just the birds that frequently visited the prison yard but also the inmates themselves and, by extension, all Malawians

forced by President Banda's autocratic rule to flee into exile. (1994, p.89) Mapanje's cry is therefore a cry for justice against oppression, subjugation and injustice. The persona denounces "the chaos of invented autocracies" that is preventing the Malawian people from freedom and justice. The chattering wagtails' voice, as is it is offered to notice, come from "the vault of Chingwe's Hole".

The opening lines reveal a frontal opposition of the poet against the despotic regime of Banda and his followers. What strikes the reader at this early stage of the collection is the poet's desire to name openly the plight threatening his people despite the woeful atmosphere prevailing. The evocation of Chingwe's Hole in the first line is quite meaningful. In traditional Malawi, the name actually evokes a very deep hole in the ground whose depth is undeterminable. It is borrowed from a chief who wanted tribesmen that refused to obey his orders thrown into the hole. Nazombe explains the relevance of the prologue and Chigwe's Hole in the following terms:

The prologue with which Mapanje's second book of poems opens serves, among other thing~. to establish a connection between the two volumes through the reference to Chingwe's Hole on Zomba Plateau. According to local belief, this is the hole into which wrong-doers were in the distant past dropped as their punishment. In the prologue, however, the hole is closely identified with the detention which the poet and other victims like him have experienced. (1994, p.89)

There is therefore a close link between Chingwe's Hole and the prison the title of the collection refers to. The term is a metaphorical portrayal of Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison which happened to be a center of torture and oppression of the harmless victims of Malawi's dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The poet's frontal challenging of Banda's dictatorship as the prologue offers to notice is made possible by the location from which he is now leading the struggle. Contrary to his first collection *Of Chameleons and Gods* published when the poet was still living in Malawi, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* was published when he was in exile. Benefitting therefore from a certain security, the poet can overtly denounce the atrocities of the regime. Thus, as he captures the difficult conditions in his homeland, the poet is now committed to the diagnosis of the ills threatening his country from the "tranquil wall of York" which is an open reference to England. Indeed, though Mapanje continues to challenge the precarious conditions of his countrymen in the collection, his fight is handled from his exile in Britain after he was released from three years and-a-half years of imprisonment.

The collection therefore not only captures his prison experiences and their aftermaths but also the oppression of the Malawian masses. He denounces the lingering tradition of dictatorship and autocracy prevailing in the country by attacking its multifaceted manifestations throughout the collection. Mapanje portrays thus the oppressive forces controlling the continent and the violation of human rights that derives from their ruling as a major infringement in the attainment of a genuine freedom for his country and post-colonial Africa as a general rule. In fact, at the eve of independences in Africa, most of the young nations have been essentially dominated by an unprecedented dictatorship

violating the rights of their helpless populations. The perpetrators of this atmosphere of terror were both civil and military despots. In the Malawian context, the civil population has been since the country's independence the target of Banda and his followers with the perpetuation of the worse forms of privation and deprivation. Most of the poems in the collection *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* as Mhtatiwa observes "underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims" (Mhtatiwa, 2009, p.13). Such an allegorical portrayal of the Malawian people's sufferings is a means for the poet to alleviate their pain.

The first group of victims of Banda's despotic regime are from his own circle. The totalitarian leader has established a one-party ruling system which compels all the elite to join him. Thus, those who happened to disagree with him were subject to severe reprisals. The poem "The Rise of the New Toadies (1983)" is quite illustrative in this regard. Mapanje portrays Banda as a blood-shed leader capable to perpetrate any kind of atrocities to preserve his regime. Dedicated to Félix Mnthali⁵, the poem starts with the depiction of a bloody atmosphere which reveals to the reader the "streaming blood of luscious Zomba strawberries/[that] coagulates today ..." (Mapanje, 1993, p.10). The notion of blood pervading in the preceding lines is an instance of the oppressive atmosphere depicted in the poem and the entire collection as well. Anthony Nazombe's comment provides an overview on the genesis of the poem and the context from which it emerged. He writes this on that account:

Jack Mapanje accurately captures the

⁵ He is a Malawian poet, novelist and playwright Who happens to be Mapanje's companion in the fight against Banda's despotic regime and dictatorship and oppressive regimes.

atmosphere of fear, tension and uncertainty prevalent in Malawi at the time in a piece called 'The Rise of the New Toadies (1983).' The familiar sight of little boys selling strawberries on Zomba Plateau now only serves to remind one of the recently spilt blood. No ministerial Mercedes Benzes move up and down the street of the town below. Instead, there are roadblocks everywhere. Mapanje has a government spokesman warning would-be followers of the murdered politicians against similar 'liberal jokes' and threatening 'gun-point burial.' All the other features of a totalitarian state are present: jammed foreign radio stations, surveillance by the secret police and a self-imposed curfew. A church-gate is burnt following a bishop's call for a requiem mass and a Presbyterian pastor is banished to his home village for being so bold as to preach against the murder. (1994, p.91)

This comment clearly reveals a woeful environment in which bloodshed is made an ordinary phenomenon. In the post-independent Malawi depicted by Mapanje, Banda and his followers have made of the country a place wherein the death of individual citizens and political opponents is an ordinary phenomenon. The poem is thus an allegory to a real event that took place in Zomba, the first capital of Malawi, during the reign of president Banda in May 1983. Mapanje denounces through the poem the killing of four politicians who paid the huge price for their opposition to Banda. The rivalry between those who cry for change and the proponents of the regime has thus resulted into the murder of the four men. Accused of betrayal, the four political opponents have been killed and their murder

has been assimilated to an accident. The last two stanzas of the poem reveal the rivalry dominating the post-independent Malawian political scene nurturing bloodshed and murders. In the persona's words, the Malawian political scene has become a place where:

Everybody sniffs from the backyard of their fuming
huts,
To spare the people further slanderous outside lies...
Apparently, the 'yobbos' only wanted the air cleared,
but
The other toadies wouldn't wait; you know the
pattern! (Mapanje, 1993, p.10)

The term "yobbos" refers here to the political leaders, intellectuals and other citizens who yearned for change. This yearning for change led them to a fierce opposition against "the toadies", which is a term referring to Banda and his followers. The term "pattern" to which the persona alludes within the poem is meant to show the extent to which this bloodshed atmosphere has unfortunately become a common plight dominating post-colonial Africa. Post-colonial African regimes share for the great majority of them the common features. The conflict opposing rulers and ruled are almost characterized by the disproportional use of force to stay in power. The seriousness of the matter addressed authorizes the poet to dedicate another poem to this phenomenon. The last poem in the cluster of poems entitled "Another Fool's Day in" is devoted to the bloody oppression that characterizes governance in post-colonial Malawi. Like the previous poem, the poem "Vigil for a Fellow Credulous Captive" is devoted to the depiction of another victim of Banda's oppressive machine. Mapanje

denounces throughout the poem the assassination of Anenenji, an “eminent public figures whose only crime is to believe in non-corrupt, just and free society”. (1993, p.16) What the persona says about Anenenji is quite striking:

Someday perhaps he too will come back home,
Not like a lion avenging his muzzle once shattered
Nor a cheetah stalking his long awaited prey.
No dead bones, however tough, ever take on flesh
Again, outside myths. No someday Anenenji will
Surface as bones, mere bones, brittly washed up this
Makokola beach, scattered by the morning breakers
(Mapanje, 1993, p.15)

The above lines reveal a chaotic environment with the omnipresence of death. The three introductory lines to the poem portray the persona’s hope to see his friend Anenenji back home. This optimistic mood enlivening the persona at the beginning of the poem quite contrasts with the mortuary environment prevailing in the lines that follow. As the reader has just gone through these three introductory lines, he becomes aware of the dramatic mood that dominates the persona in the rest of the poem. As the following lines attest, it becomes crystal clear that the persona is committed to the mourning of his friend rather than expecting his actual coming back home. The vigil that the title of the poem evokes is therefore a tribute that the poet pays to Anenenji who had certainly been murdered. Nazombe describes the militant in the following words:

He is an underpaid labourer who spends his free time
selling MCP membership cards as a means of raising

funds for the organisation. Like all political fanatics in Malawi at the peak of MCP power, Anenenji insists that even babies should have cards bought for them. Every time he takes the money to the areal party branch for safe keeping. One day, however, a millstone is tied to Anenenji's legs, he is shoved into a sack and then thrown into Lake Malawi. (1994, p.92)

Though a well-known and hardworking member of the presidential party, Anenenji has not been spared by Banda's despotic regime. The militant has indeed been killed at the slightest suspicion of betrayal. The president has installed an atmosphere of terror well-orchestrated with the support of a significant minority committed to his cause.

This hegemonic perpetuation fits well Gramsci's perception of social hegemony. Gramsci defines indeed hegemony as "consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (1971, p.12). Chirambo views for this reason the president's long-term rule to have been done in this perspective for as he observes, "Banda's regime appropriated citizens' cultural activities producing a political discourse that popularized and legitimized the dictatorship" (2007, p.139).

Like the majority of despotic regimes, Banda relied on populism⁶ to legitimate his power. The poem "No, Creon, There's No Virtue in Howling is an intertextual allusion Mapenje uses to protest against Banda's use of populism to justify his

⁶ Populism is a political approach that seeks to represent the interests and concerns of ordinary people (the masses) against the elite. It is an ideology used by many dictators to legitimate their power.

bloodshed. The poem opens indeed with an epigram allowing the persona to recall president Banda through the borrowing words from Teiresias in Sophocles' *Antigone* that "it is no glory to kill and kill again" (Mapenje, 1994, p.12). The persona's words addressed to the Malawian despot through the metaphor of Creon is quite striking:

No, Creon, you overstate your image to your
People. No, there's no virtue in howling so.
How can you hope to repair Haemon, your
Own blood, our only hope for the throne,
By reproaching his body mangled by your
Decree and put to rest without the requiem (Mapenge,
1994, p.12)

The poem states clearly the populist attitude of the dictator for the persona warns the dictator not to "overstate" his "image" to his people. As it is possible to notice, the oppressive forces that emerged in post-independent Malawi have prevented the people from any possibility to freedom and justice. The regime has perpetrated the worse forms of violence and abuse of every kind upon the Malawian people. The emergence of such an oppressive atmosphere at the eve of the country's independence did not allow the people to reap serenely their aspiration for a genuine political freedom.

2. An allegory of a lingering culture of bad governance

The political chaos that Banda's dictatorship has favored gave birth to various socioeconomic plights thus plunging his country into an indefinite lethargy. The lack of freedom on the political scene has maintained thus the country within the vicious circle of poverty. As noticeable in post-

independent Malawi, the battle at the political scene between Banda's autocratic regime and harmless Malawian citizens did not allow the ruling class to elaborate effective economic policies to meet the growing demand of the people in post-colonial Malawi.

The great efforts Banda's regime devoted to the reprisal of his political challengers and the great deal of the masses, did not allow him to set effective policies likely to anchor the stability of the country's economy and to assure a consistent economic growth as well. Though the majority of the poems within the collection *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* are devoted to the criticism of the oppressiveness of Banda's long-term rule, some represent a thorough investment of the poet to study the main causes of the ruler's failure.

A certain number of poems call on the reader to sail back to post-independent Malawi to apprehend the ineffective economic policies adopted by the country at the dawn of its independence. The fact that Banda missed to set his country on the track of development is for instance vivid in the poem "The Haggling Old Woman at Balaka" where he denounces the wrong departure of the country's economy. The persona reports the comment of an old woman at Balaka that provides an account of Banda's ineffective economic policies. Comparing the country's past to its present, the old woman gives an insight of the results of Banda's economic reforms as follows:

I was fed on breasts and Goat milk,
Not on your silly, dust-milk-tins!
And you girls today are cocked up,
You sell chicken eggs for cokes and fantas
To suckle your babies, then you ask me
Why your babies are rickets and ribs?

Now you come to lend me money, you say,
To buy fertilizers to improve my yield.
How generous, how degrading! And I must
Suppose your banks won't dry out! Can't
You see I am too tired for these tricks?
And from now on I will keep my crop to
Myself – you have no shame building your
Brick houses on old women's dying energies
Under the lie of national development! (1994, p.9)

The poem can clearly be viewed as a criticism of Malawi's economic policies at the eve of its independence. Through this poem, Mapenje commits himself to the satiric portrayal of Banda's economic policies. Many features within the poem confirms Wa Thiongo's definition of the role of satire in the society. He maintains indeed that "satire takes for its province a whole society, and for its purpose, criticism. The satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms." (Ngugi, 1972, p.55) Thus as Banda turned back from his country's traditional economic assets to the detriment of new imported models, Mapenje satirizes and scorns the president's wrong economic choices.

The old woman's comment clearly reveals that the dictator's economic orientation is far from being effective. As it is possible to notice during the rule of president Banda, he has abandoned "goat milk" to borrow some "silly, dust-milk-tins". Pursuing his deception, the president has decided to turn his people's "eggs for cokes and fantas". This metaphor is a sarcasm against the wrong choices done by the president by favoring the consumption of foreign products to the detriment of local stuffs. The agricultural sector has not been spared by

the leader's random decisions. The old woman questions the relevance of the money given her "to buy fertilizers to improve her yield". This is an allusion to the huge amount the president spent to finance the country's agricultural production that has been swallowed by corruption and mismanagement. Banda is therefore accused by the old woman to have ingrained his country's standpoint "under the lie of national development".

The ineffective policies initiated by Banda set his country to an unprecedented precarious situation. Far from improving the lot of the people, the masses in post-independent Malawi were starving with no help from their government. Their attempt to raise the attention of the authorities were severely repressed. This chaotic atmosphere has been captured within various poems of the collection. The poem "Baobab Fruit Picking (or Development in Monkey Bay)" recaptures the sufferings of the masses abandoned by their country. A pervasive mood of disillusionment permeates the persona throughout the poem as he notices the betrayal of the people's aspirations.

Endorsing the collective voice of the Malawian masses the persona asserts that "we've fought before, but this is worse than rape!" (Mapenje, 1994, p.22) The introductory line is more explicit of the mood prevailing in the entire poem. The poem is thus a means for Mapenje to subvert Banda's failure as the first president of his country. Contrary to its neighbors namely South Africa and Zimbabwe possessing rich mineral resources, the Malawian economy rests essentially upon the agricultural sector. However, due to ineffective policies, the sector missed to be the locomotive of the country's economy as it was expected to be leaving thus the Malawian people in a situation of extreme poverty. As the persona explains, this situation of extreme poverty compelled "husbands to the mines/Of

Jo'burg" and on the other hand the country "imported the Boers" (Mapenje, 1994, p.22) The situation depicted here was a familiar one in Banda's Malawi as poverty forced millions of Malawians to migrate in neighboring countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe working in the mines to find their livelihood and take care of their relatives in their homeland.

3. A challenge against dependency theory

Mapenje's depiction of the post-colonial plight of the Malawian people represents a novelistic paradigmatic approach to the African predicament. His collection challenges in this regard the traditional dependency theory underlying the great deal of criticism about the continent's painful history. According to Bill Ashcroft et al., dependency theory "offers an explanation for the continued impoverishment of colonized 'Third World' countries on the grounds that underdevelopment is not internally generated but a structural condition of global capitalism itself." (2007, p.59) Dependence theorists as it is argued admit that "beyond the end of formal colonialism, the value transfers of profits have continued to flow from the Global South to the North." (Kufakurinani et al., 2017, p.vi) Likewise, Nkrumah who is considered as a pioneer of dependency theory in post-colonial Africa portrays in his book *Neocolonialism: The last Stage of Imperialism* (1963), neocolonialism as the worst form of colonialism and consequently the main cause of the continent's present delay.

A preview of the people's history of subjugation appears relevant in this regard to better apprehend the historical context nurturing the African people's suffering. The end of World War Two marked indeed a crucial juncture in the Western imperial adventure in the world. At the eve of the War,

many former subjugated peoples and colonial territories started to question the status quo. From Asia to Africa the indigenous populations' thirst of freedom and self-determination grew to a point of no return. By 1947 India attained its right to self-determination from Great Britain's colonial yoke which happened to be the most sophisticated and major colonial power before France, Spain, and Portugal. This was to open, a couple of years later, waves of independence occasioning a substantial redefinition of British and French imperial maps.

Hosting the torch of enlightenment, Ghana opened the meter in 1957 for sub-Saharan Africans followed by Guinea in 1958. Thus, by the 1960s and the 1990s, the former British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonial territories in Africa gained their right to run freely their own political and economic affairs. Ngugi contends that "between 1960 and 1964, (...) many countries in Africa like Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, Nigeria, to mention only a few, had hoisted their 20 national flags and were singing new national anthems instead of those of their conquerors from Europe as was the practice in the colonial era (1993, pp.20-21). The euphoria arose by the wind of decolonization has been very quickly turned into an unprecedented disillusionment. Everywhere in post-colonial Africa indeed, "while the politician stuffs his stomach with food, the poor man continues to starve and remains perilous" (Egudu, 1978, p.88).

Missing to point the responsibility of Africans, the betrayal of independence dreams and the present chaos in Africa is said to have taken its roots from the difficult colonial legacy of the continent and also the early resurgence of the former colonial masters to control the young African nations. This unilateral accusation of the former colonial masters and

the West in general as being unduly responsible for the unfruitfulness of African independences may justify the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the solutions hitherto proposed for the total liberation of the continent.

However, far from blaming unduly the western imperial forces, Mapanje seeks the liberation of his people from the interior. As he privileges the endogenous factors over the exogenous ones, Mapanje is able to pinpoint the real causes preventing his people to accede to a genuine freedom. By denouncing the tradition of dictatorship and autocracy dominating post-independent Malawi, Mapanje also points by the same token the relevant contribution of this oppressive environment in the perpetuation of a culture of poverty and political instability in the country. Therefore, rather than unduly blaming external forces for the plight of his country, the poet privileges the significant contribution of internal factors with the post-colonial elite as the key actors. Indeed, before pointing the endogenous causes of the post-colonial African predicament⁷, it is worthy situating first the responsibilities of Africans themselves for a civilization is conquered from the outside only if it has been destroyed from the inside.

This is a novelistic view from which Jack Mapanje proposes to challenge the African predicament. This perspective clearly questions the traditional standpoint from which the continent's problems have been hitherto challenged. The perception according to which Western imperial forces are the main and unique plotters in post-independent Africa is thus questioned and opened to a new debate. Mapanje's criticism against post-colonial Malawian leaders in the collection *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* challenges the

⁷ The term has been used to refer to the difficult conditions of African people as an inherent consequence of their meeting with western imperial forces from the sixteenth century onwards.

dependency theory dominating post-colonial criticism. As its advocates contend, it is a theory which “offers an explanation for the continued impoverishment of colonized ‘Third World’ countries on the grounds that underdevelopment is not internally generated but a structural condition of global capitalism itself.” (Ashcroft et al., 2001, p.67) The former colonial masters such as France and Britain tend thus to be unduly blamed for all Africa’s problems. The emergence of new imperial forces, namely China and the United States and their influence in Africa has made vivid the criticism against the impact of external powers in perpetuating the impoverishment of post-colonial African nations.

Mapenje’s approach to the African predicament seems more realistic for it privileges the responsibility of Africans themselves in the plight undergoing the continent. The poet points thus the responsibility of the elite in the establishment of an endemic tradition of corruption, dictatorship, oppression and mismanagement. Many poems within the collection reflect the corrupted world established by the new leaders in Malawi.

Conclusion

The study has provided clues that substantiate the intricate interplay between democratic rights, good governance, political stability and economic and social welfare. The analysis of Mapenje’s poetic depiction of the long-term rule of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda dominated by dictatorship, oppression and bad governance in post-independent Malawi has permitted to lift a corner of the veil upon the deepest causes that still nurture the African predicament. It comes out from the study that dictatorship and oppression nurture bad governance underlying the country’s economic backslide. It is

therefore crystal clear that the inability of post-colonial African countries to maintain and perpetuate a democratic tradition led them to an unprecedented environment of violence and political instability preventing thus any economic prosperity. Mapenje's approach to the African predicament, as it is possible to notice, challenges the traditional dependency theoretical standpoint from which the African predicament is handled. By committing his poetic imagination to the protest against Banda's despotic and oppressive regime through metaphors and allegories Mapenge proves the need to privilege democracy and good governance to liberate post-colonial African nations from the yoke of poverty.

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